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RANCH ROMANCES

A CLAYTON MAGAZINE

First September Number

20c

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A Complete Western Romance

By

BUCK LAVIN

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By Victor Rousseau

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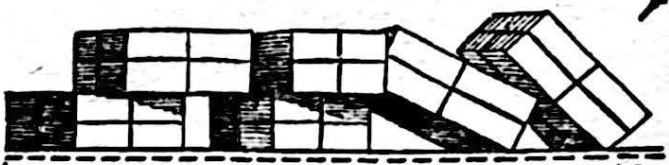

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Sally of the Sage

By Buck Lavin

Straight to the land where adventure and romance sweep unexpectedly out from the trails, catch one up in a whirlwind and leave one breathless, came Sally. And to all the range-folks—and one hombre in particular—Sally, who took the whirlwinds as they came and rode exultantly through them, will always be just what she called herself—Sally of the Sage.

CHAPTER I

OLD POP REYNOLDS reached down across his dust-stained knees and gathered in the reins that lay hooked over the brake pedal. He turned for a final inspection of his stage-coach before chirping to his horses and taking up the long trudge from Coyote Springs to Waldo. While the gnarled fingers of his right hand twisted about the reins, the fingers of his left hooked into his colorless mustache and pawed there speculatively.

Behind him, the top of the stage had been opened to admit a combination of dust and air that was preferable to dust alone. The day was hot. Little air stirred and such as did play in gusty swirls over the plains was laden with acrid dust.

"It'll be a right long hump, gal," he said, throwing his voice downward through the hatch, "a right long one. I reckon you'll be a heap done in afore we sight Waldo. 'Tain't 'zactly a day fer gals to be a-travelin'."

He smiled at the response that came to him. The girl passenger suited his idea of what a girl ought to be. He knew that she was young, about twenty, and he knew that she was prettier than any one girl had a right to be. He also knew that her name was Sally.

Old Pop Reynolds was a loquacious soul and, when he had relieved the driver who carried the stage from Sagetown to Coyote Springs, he had evinced an unusual interest in the lone passenger thus given into his charge.

"She's a right smart little critter," he told the other driver. "Seems like she's dead set on travelin' a heap, too. Funny she don't stop over a day or two an' git the kinks out'n her system!"

"Name's Sally," the first driver had vouchsafed. "She's a dern fine rider to have along. Don't say much o' nothin' an' ain't a mite o' bother on the trail."

Old Pop grunted. He would have been glad if the girl had been somewhat talkative. Girls, of course, said little of interest to such a prominent and important personage as a stage driver, but the hours on the trail were pretty lonely to a man whose years conduced garrulity.

With this in mind, Old Pop turned and spoke down through the hatch. The answer came back and pleased him, made him frankly admire the girl passenger:

"One can't very well pick the weather for a long trip. The sooner we start, the sooner we'll be there."

Old Pop chuckled, tightened the reins, spat into the dust of the road and released his mustache long enough to wave an adieu to the hangers-on about the Golden Bar Saloon and Restaurant. Then the horses lurched against the harness, the brakes squeaked free of the wheels, and the stage rumbled into motion.

Inside, the girl sat quite still. It was evident that she was unaccustomed to the country through which she was traveling. Her clothing was enough to attest that fact. Though she had obviously made some attempt to dress herself in the style of the West, her garments were new and not such as could be purchased in the land of cactus and sage.

She wore high leather shoes, a short leather skirt that was not divided for riding astraddle, and a wide felt hat. But at her throat she had caught together the edges of a white shirtwaist with a heavy gold pin, and under the pin reposed a small black tie.

The edges of the tie were coated slightly with dust and there was evidence of more dust on the whiteness of the shirtwaist, but, withal, the strange passenger aroused a deal of comment and all of it was laudatory. The fact that she was bound to Waldo told the curious nothing.

Down through the narrow street of the town, lined on each side as it was by false-front stores and saloons, the heavy stage rumbled. Old Pop, ever gloating in a sense of his own importance, waved a greeting to the various men who sprawled about low porches. Down near the end of the street was the last stopping place for the stage until it wound down the steep hill carrying it into the town of Waldo more than forty miles to the west.

This last stop was the Even Chance Hotel.

The place, though it went by the name of hotel, was really the biggest gambling hall in Coyote Springs. There it was that cowboys gave vent to the exuberance of paydays and wooed the goddess of chance with the abandon of their kind.

The place had a falsefront upon which was painted a huge but faded sign proclaiming the glories that lay within. Its reputation was none too good among the more sober citizens of the border. None had ever had evidence of actual cheating in the roulette or the faro or the monte that was played there, yet few men ever were known to win money.

The falsefront was punctured with holes. They were bullet holes, slugs that had expressed the delight and the exuberance of boisterous riders of the range after partaking of the glories that were pictured on the great sign. Other bullets had been in the expression of less kindly emotions. Several times had the grim shadow of violent death blotted momentarily the hilarity that fairly bulged the walls of the Even Chance. That gave the place a bad name; gave frequenters of it a worse name.

But for years the stage had stopped there after leaving the post office, and custom dies slowly in the land of the setting sun.

Old Pop reined in and called raucously from his perch on the stage. One or two men appeared at the door of the place and stepped onto the porch. Their eyes rested speculatively upon the travel-worn stage.

"Anythin' tuh go?" Old Pop queried. "Better be askin' Pete hisself—don't want tuh miss nothin'!"

Through the door of the gambling hall came a young man. He was dressed in the picturesque garb of the plains. His face wore the solid tan of the open places and his hands were as brown as the plains themselves. His features were shaded not a little by the flopping brim of a sombrero, and about his hips hung a wide cartridge belt with a gun holstered at each side.

As he stepped onto the low porch it was clear that he was not entirely steady on his feet. He wore the knee boots and high heels common to the range and they clattered sharply as he strode ominously over the boards toward the coach.

"Lissen here, old man," he said thickly to the driver, "how's chances fer a ride without any money? I been whoopin' it up, so I have, an' I'm plucked as clean as a prairie hen fer roastin'! I'll be a-payin' you when things brighten up fer me. I gotta git outa this here desert metropolis or I'll never have a dime again!"

Many such requests were made of Old Pop. Almost every trip he encountered this situation of a bankrupt range rider begging a ride away from the scene of his temptation and downfall. To one and all he had but one answer to give. He gave that now, in stereotyped fashion:

"Makes no diff'runce to me who rides, stranger. Makes no diff'runce tuh me who pays er not. But yuh gotta see the agent er I'll lose me job."

"Who's the agent?" the cowboy asked, his voice still thick with the weight of retribution and the fumes of red liquor.

"Seth Lundow—down tuh the post office," Old Pop offered phlegmatically.

"Wait here," the cowboy grunted, "I'll be a-seein' o' him—"

"Wait me eye!" Old Pop bellowed. "I ain't holdin' up no stage fer you, sonny! Ride day arter to-morrer. I reckon it's yore own fault yo're broke!"

"I wouldn't stay in this here blot on the plains another night if they give me the place!" the cowboy asserted belligerently. "I rides this here stage out right now!"

"Then you pays the fare, so you do!" Old Pop said with finality. "Foolin' with stage drivers is bad business, an' I reckon you knows it. Road agents catch merry hell, these days, an' messin' up stages is road agentin'!"

The cowboy laughed lightly, pushed back his wide hat with one hand and dropped the other to the butt of one of his guns. His fingers crept through the folds of his rumpled hair and he appeared to be thinking deeply.

"Hold up half a second, old guy," he said at last. "I'll be a-ridin' with you, an' I'll pay as I go."

He stepped quickly onto the porch and approached a saddle and trappings that had been piled there to await starting time. With the speed of expertness he opened the saddle bags and removed some small personal possessions. Then he swung the saddle onto his shoulder and came toward the coach.

A few feet from the porch he paused, called out to the men inside the Even Chance. When a small crowd had gathered on the low porch he spoke to them.

"Six days ago," he said, "I hit this here town with a roll o' bills, a thirst, an' a dee-sire fer excitement. I got 'em all but the roll o' bills, yet.

"I also had a hoss, you'll remember. You got the bills an' you got the hoss. I'm now a-leavin' o' yore fair town broke. I gotta leave an' I ain't got the stage fare. I offers this here saddle fer public auction. Look 'er over, gents, an' bids is bein' received hot an' fast 'cause the stage can't hang around over long!"

Old Pop looked down at the saddle. It was a beautiful thing; one that would stir the pride of any owner. There were silver markings inlaid in artistic fashion through the leather and the saddle horn itself was hand carved leather of the first grade. "I kin stand the loss o' my hoss, my money an' my health," the cowboy went on, "but this here saddle goin' the long road jest about tears the heart out'n me. She's a Mex saddle, a real one. As fine as ever yuh seen—what am I bid afore I soak yore trails with tears

an' decides tuh rob yore banks fer my fare?"

Bids came thick and fast. Eager men sought possession of the saddle and as each bid outmatched its predecessor, the maker of it was the recipient of angry glances from those outbid. Old Pop, his interest high, leaned over the side of the stage. The girl within heard what was being said and decided to see for herself what was happening.

She stood on the seat and poked her head through the hatch in the top of the stage. Few men noticed her there, yet she had a clear view of all that took place. She regarded the young auctioneer with interest. A look of surprise crossed her beautiful face as she saw that he was young and broad and wholesome-looking, despite the quite obvious traces of his recent dissipation.

Sixty dollars was bid for the saddle, sixty-five, seventy—still the bidding went on. As he counted the bids, the cowboy ran a hand almost lovingly over the silver markings and the hand carved leather. More magnificent than words was the grief that traced over his tanned face as he prepared to part with his treasure.

Suddenly the girl took a hand. To the amazement of all assembled, her feminine voice cut in. "I offer a hundred dollars for the saddle," she cried out, "and who is there who would deprive me of it?"

The cowboy turned and glanced upward. His face flushed and his eyes beamed at the sight of her face. "One hundred dollars!" she repeated. The cowboy shifted his weight from one foot to the other, patted the saddle a few times with tender hand, then looked upward at Old Pop.

"What," he asked, "is the fare to Waldo?"

"Nine bucks," the old man answered.

"The biddin' is over, gents," the cowboy announced, "an' the be-yoot-iful young lady has bought the saddle fer nine bucks! I bids you adios an' hopes you choke in hell!"

He flung the saddle upward onto the storing place atop the stage and stepped into the coach, closing the half door after him. The girl stepped from her seat and regarded the man opposite her. She was fumbling in a black bag and drew forth a roll of bills.

Very carefully she counted out a hundred dollars and tossed the bills onto the cowboy's lap. They spread and fluttered to the floor of the stage. The cowboy leaned forward to rescue them and as he did so the stage started with a lurch. He careened ridiculously sidewise. His head thumped against the side of the coach and a look of angry pain creased his face into sharp wrinkles. The girl smiled and he saw her.

"I ain't any too steady on the boots, lady," he explained. "This here Coyote Springs is plumb onhealthy fer gamblin' hounds what lack sense. I'm one o' them."

He counted out the money, selected nine dollars with ostentatious care and passed it upward to Old Pop. The rest of the money he folded and dropped into the lap of the girl.

"Fer nine bucks, sweet young thing," he mumbled, "you has bought yerself a right fine saddle!"

Heedless, then, of her objections, he pulled his wide hat low over his face, propped his feet on the cushion beside her and gave himself to wooing the art of forgetfulness in placid if jolting slumber.

Atop the box Old Pop Reynolds chuckled with delight. The girl heard him. She glanced at the partially hidden face of the gambler whose saddle she had bought. Something about the contour of the chin pleased her. After all, a man must be a man!

A resonant snore grew in volume and seemed to reverberate under the crown of the great hat. The girl smiled in spite of herself. The cowboy who had been gallant enough virtually to give her his saddle sat hunched in a heap opposite her and his snores droned off onto the hot air with a total disregard of her right, her comfort, and her presence.

CHAPTER II

ON the seat of the stage, Old Pop Reynolds sensed about what was taking placed behind him. He smiled

wrily and tugged somewhat violently at his colorless mustache as though he sought to tear from his lips the persistent smile that lingered there. Here, thought the old man, was a situation. Most of the men of the range thereabouts were well known to Old Pop. But this casual cowboy, with the evidence of too great a conviviality still clinging to him, was a stranger.

The stage driver was wise in the ways of men and wiser in the ways of the Even Chance. The thing through which this frank young man had so evidently passed, was familiar to Pop. He had carried away many a passenger under identical circumstances, but never, he thought, quite such a passenger. There was an air of confident strength about the young fellow that caught one's eye.

Add to that the presence of the beautiful girl called Sally, the remarkable purchase of the saddle, and now the calm sleeping of the rider, and Pop looked ahead to a good forty miles of dust and jolting progress. He spat speculatively at a sage bush and jerked again at his mustache.

The stage jolted on. The snores, now gentle ones that crept from under the crown of the hat like a solemn requiem, now thunderous and choking and resonant as the fumes of liquor throttled the sleeping cowboy, continued in varying crescendo and tempo. Clouds of dust rose from the wheels and sifted upward through the floor boards of the ancient and creaking vehicle. Overhead, high and motionless of wing, soared a buzzard. The hoofs of the horses thudded softly into the thick sand and dust, the coach swayed and jolted to inequalities of the trail.

Two hours passed, and Old Pop took to glancing backward into the open hatch behind him. He could see that the cowboy was still propped limply in the corner of the stage. His wide hat had fallen upside down upon his knees and his face, with mouth open and cheeks sagging, was exposed. The forehead was dotted with beads of perspiration. The faintest traces of a light beard were showing.

If ever a man was showing at his worst, thought the driver, this young man was. But, even at that, there was something fine in the face. It was a strong face, the sort that speaks of character and virility and a sort of carefree and dare-devil capacity for whatever presents itself in the way of excitement.

Then Old Pop glanced more sharply downward and saw the head of the girl. She was sitting quite erect, her white shirtwaist a contrast to the drab inner decorations of the coach. One arm was propped upon a bag which she had placed beside her upon the seat. Her cheek rested against her hand and her face was turned toward the open door so that she gazed out over the plains.

She appeared to be asleep, but, before Old Pop turned away, she showed wakefulness of an interesting sort. The cowboy's snores struck another snag. Rhythm of tempo disappeared. His mouth snapped shut suddenly and a rush of air centered in his nostrils. His cheeks inflated, his head jerked, he strangled. Then he emitted such a prodigious snort that he waked himself. The girl laughed in delight at his discomfiture.

The rider sat suddenly erect, oriented himself by a series of darting glances and gestures, then grinned sheepishly.

"Reckon I been asleep," he allowed slowly, his brown hand rubbing against his face as though to rouse him to full and instant wakefulness.

"I reckon," the girl murmured sweetly, "that you have."

"There was an awful liar I worked with onct," the rider went on; "he claimed that when I slept on the range, I snored fit to stampede a herd."

"He was an awful liar," the girl agreed, still in sweet tones, "I wonder what ever made him say a thing like that."

The young man regarded her intently. She returned his gaze unwinkingly, and for the second time he realized her beauty. It added to the confusion her words had wrought in his mind. He wet his lips much as though his mouth was full of plain's dust.

"No tellin'," he grunted finally, at the

same time rescuing his wide hat from the floor of the stage and affecting to brush it off. "Cowboys is mostly liars, ma'am. They gits queer idees. Fer instance, imagine me gittin' the idee I could drink all the liquor in Coyote Springs an' break the bank o' the Even Chance while I was a-doin' of it! Now that's what I calls an idee, Miss!"

"My knowledge of the Even Chance is most casual," the girl remarked steadily, "I saw it just once as we drove by—but it seemed in perfect health and enjoying remarkable prosperity."

Once again he glanced steadily at her. Her poise rather upset him. She was taunting him, of course, but he sensed more than mere badinage in her words and manner. She was reproving him.

"There's plenty o' money in the Even Chance," he grunted. "I know. I put it there."

"You sold your horse?"

"Yeah. Sold him. I wasn't mindin' that any, Miss, because I got him in a trade down Waldo way an' the gent that traded him knew hosses a heap sight better'n any gent I ever crossed up with. I'm tellin' you the truth, Ma'am, when I says that there hoss had more the matter of him than any hoss ever I seen! He should have incorporated, that animal!"

"You look as though you ought to know horses," the girl mused. "I am surprised that you would be taken in by a trader."

"A man does funny things when he's in his cups, Miss."

"Cups? Do I understand that you spend a great deal of time drinking yourself into idiocy?"

"I reckon I does like my liquor a mite too well," the man answered contritely, "but honest, it don't take an awful lot o' drinkin' to make an idiot o' me."

Something of amused sympathy flashed into the girl's fine eyes. It seemed that she regretted having reproved the man so completely. "Drinking out here is perhaps different than in the East," she said.

"It shore is!" he agreed heartily. "Out here, Miss, drinkin' is developed to a science! It's the pastime o' the male citizenry an' a mark o' manhood."

"Does the owner of the Even Chance drink?" she asks calmly.

"Shore. But he never gits drunk, somehow."

"He is rich, is he not?" There was a tremendous persistence in her gentle tones.

"I reckon."

"The two are apt to go together," she finished complacently.

"I reckon," he agreed again. His manner showed that he had taken her lesson to heart. He shifted his position, fished in the pocket of his gay flannel shirt and removed a package of tobacco. She watched him as he deftly rolled a cigarette. He wet one end of the paper and permitted the unlighted smoke to hang expectantly from his lower lip while he sought a match.

He scratched the match on the door of the stage, held it close to the end of the cigarette. Then his face suddenly changed, a look of confusion spreading over it. He snapped the unlighted smoke out onto the plains. "I'm plumb sorry," he apologized. "Y'see, I ain't used to havin' ladies 'round. I just kinda smoke how an' where I please."

"Make another one and enjoy your smoke," the girl urged. "I really like the smell of tobacco."

He looked at her inquiringly; then rolled and lighted a cigarette. When the smoke clouds hung between them on the listless air, he waved his brown hand through them and dispersed them. His enjoyment of the smoke was unquestionable. He inhaled deeply, exhaled with the evident satisfaction.

"You ain't of this country, Miss," he stated suddenly.

"No. I am from the East. But I love the country already. I am going to stay out here."

There was the eagerness of anticipation in her words and it pleased him. He grinned and the girl found vast attraction in that grin.

"I reckon I wouldn't find much fun in leavin' it, myself," he nodded. "But it ain't really a girl's country. It's a man's country, Miss. Things pop sudden an' hot out here."

"I am not afraid," said the girl, quietly.

"You wouldn't be," he agreed. "But mebbe you will be later on. Men out here ain't restricted in expressin' their natural inclinations. Right over the trail we're ridin' now the covered wagons rumbled not so long ago. Indians with their war paint on rode these rollin' plains an' split the silence with their war cries. Seein' the bones o' pioneers hereabouts ain't a lost art yet!"

"I love the romance of it all!" she cried. "What a people they were, those pioneers. Tell me about them."

She settled herself on the uncomfortable cushion and looked eagerly into his eyes. He was confused. On top of the stage, Old Pop jerked again at his mustache and the persistent smile lurked under his grimy paw. He spat again onto the plains, tossed the reins in anticipation, and shifted his foot to the brake pedal that he might lean backward and hear the better what was said in the stage.

"I reckon I can't," the range rider grunted. "They just come out here, drove out the red men an' settled. They got into the cattle business and built up homesteads. Towns sprung up. There weren't so many women in them days. Things got kind of rough. The six-gun spoke the language best understood, Miss.

"That bein' the case, a man relied a heap on his hardware. What cattle he couldn't buy he was right apt to steal. Just as soon as the money showed out here, the gamblers followed it. We're in that stage now. Road agents an' gamblers are plumb common on these plains. You'll git plenty excitement if you're plannin' to stay out here."

"Are you trying to frighten me?" she asked archly.

"Gawd, no! Last thing I'd ever try to do—I'm only tellin' you. You asked me to."

"I asked you to tell me about the pioneers."

"I never knew none," he grunted. "All I can tell you is what I know now. I'm a cowboy, Miss. I'm just a range rider. I ain't what they call a historian."

He puffed at his cigarette and found it had gone out. He struck another match and filled the stage with fragrant smoke clouds. The girl sat quiet, regarded him with an air of understanding. At last she said: "The country is still in the making, is it not?"

"Yeah—still in the makin'."

"There must be a world of opportunity out here," she mused.

"Is it that you are seekin'?" he asked.

"No. I do not need it, exactly. I was thinking more of you. It seems quite a pity that so young a man, so obviously strong and healthy, should throw away his life in maudlin carousing while all around him an Empire is in the build ing."

The rider whistled audibly, ran a bewildered hand over his tanned brow. On the stage top Old Pop craned his ear closer and chuckled with delight. He knew, he thought, just about how that young man felt. He caught the answer of the rider.

"I reckon you're preachin' a mite," he said slowly. "It ain't bein' done in nice society, Miss. Preachin' is fer skypilots. It never set over good with me."

Old Pop inwardly applauded the answer. The young man grew in his appraisal. It took, he felt, a very definite courage thus to shoot back at a beautiful young lady. This was about the most interesting trip the old man had ever had, he decided.

"You are probably right," the girl agreed instantly, "but it is not exactly preaching that I use. It's plain sense. Perhaps an interest in your own future. I just hate the idea of the young men of a country throwing away their lives."

"Let's talk about somethin' else," the rider suggested. "I admits to many mistakes, but I has also met up with plenty cause. Two starts I have made, Miss. This ain't no excuse I'm makin', it's just the plain facts. Twice I got a start in the cattle business. I was playin' a lone hand because I had to. Both times, gangs of rustlers run me out of business.

"It wasn't exactly an easy thing to do, that runnin' me out. It come hard fer me, an' it come hard fer them!" An

ominous tone crept into his words. "I done as much gentle shootin' as I could, Miss. I fought 'em off plenty. But they won. Twice, they won. I went broke—an' then I got foolish.

"There's a heap o' fergetfulness in hooch. I don't waste no time thinkin' when I'm drunk."

More than the simple tale which he told, the manner and tensity of the narration impressed the girl. The young rider had the art of expressing himself graphically. He made her see things more clearly than if she had visualized them on a canvas.

Impulsively she leaned forward and her small hand came to rest on his knee. He felt the flesh cringe with a delightful sense of the contact. "Please do not misunderstand me," she said. "I was certain that there was some such thing back of your misfortunes. Somehow, I just wanted to be sure. Don't talk about it if it hurts you."

"I won't," he said grimly, and she was dissapointed.

On the box above, Old Pop had become so interested that he virtually disregarded the trail ahead. The horses knew their way, could follow the ruts made by the previous passings of the rickety stage. The vehicle swung to the left to avoid a sharp coulee. The driver roused from his interest in the conversation below. He straightened on the seat, jerked the reins taut, and a curse flashed across his lips.

Standing like statues at the end of the coulee, their presence hidden by the rolling bank until the stage was virtually opposite them, were three mounted and masked men. They leveled rifles at Old Pop, and one of them, disdaining a vocal command, held the palm of his gloved hand upward.

Old Pop jerked the horses back into the hold-backs, slammed the brake lever down so that the wheels locked and slid through the shifting sand and dust with a grinding that sent showers of the fine particles upward.

Inside the coach the two passengers were thrown against each other with sharp violence. The cowboy, more accustomed to the ways of a plains stage, expressed himself without regard for the presence of the lady. He shouted upward through the open hatch: "What the hell you doin', you old lunatic!"

"Road agents!" Old Pop snapped back. "Here they come, stranger, road agents!"

The cowboy grinned a little. "Gawd knows," he mused, "I got nothin' to lose!" But his grin and his nonchalance were short-lived. He suddenly realized the presence of the girl. With such a girl, pretty as the morning sky when the artistry of dawn shot its magnificence through the fading night, what might road agents do?

He clenched his teeth and stood upon the seat beside the girl. "Sit still an' shut up," he ordered her and she saw his hand drop to the gun at his right hip. Then he spoke through the hatch toward the barely visible back of Old Pop.

"The girl, yuh damned fool," he snapped, "snap off that brake! Drive on—lash them hosses, make a try fer it anyhow!"

"Like hell I will," Old Pop growled. "They'll blow us full o' holes afore we git started."

"You'll start," the cowboy said evenly, "or I'll blow you full o' holes afore anybody starts!"

The girl saw the big gun snatched from its holster, saw it go upward through the hatch and press its muzzle deep into the side of Old Pop Reynolds. Then she heard his gasp of fear; heard the brake pedal squeak. There followed shouts in strange voices and the roar of a gun. She looked upward and saw the arm of the driver raised and a long lash winding through the air.

Then the stage lurched violently ahead, careened sidewise, caught its stride and rolled poundingly over the plains in as mad a flight as one could imagine. The force of the unexpected start had hurled the girl to the floor. Before she recover, the cowboy was down from the seat and standing over her. His gun was still in his hand.

He fired it through the open door and the acrid smell of burnt powder struck the girl's nostrils. There was sheer horror in the odor. Then the cowboy, his face

sober now and his square jaw set while his eyes flashed a fire as sharp as that from the heavy gun, stood above her and unceremoniously piled luggage upon her.

"Stay there," he commanded sharply, his body rolling back and forth to the weird lurching of the hurtling stage. "Stay there, by Gawd—an' shut up!"

The thought of disobedience never occured to the girl.

CHAPTER III

THERE followed a baptism of fire which the newcomer to the West later set down as epic. Scarcely had the stage got well under way when the form of Old Pop Reynolds tumbled backward upon the shoulders of the cowboy. There was nothing the matter with the aged driver other than a very sensible desire to avail himself of what cover offered. Outside, the roar of guns had become almost incessant, and now and then the cowboy fired in return, each time shooting through the open upper half of the doors and leaving the stage filled with the pungent smoke from his weapon.

Now he shook the form of Reynolds clear of his wide shoulders and mounted again to the seat. He had tossed aside his hat and without fear he looked up onto the roof of the stage and yanked through the hatch the big saddle with its silver trappings. This he arranged over the girl.

"Where's yore hardware, old fellah?" he demanded in steady voice of Old Pop.

"On the roof," the driver admitted, his voice quaking. "We'll be blowed to bits afore we make a hun'nerd yards."

Once again the young man rose on the seat and brought into view a rifle. This he handed Reynolds. "Use it," he snapped. "Git yoreself together. Knock over some o' them devils!"

There ensued a fusillade from the stage. Never had the girl heard such pandemonium. The stage filled quickly with the heavy smoke, and it stung her eyes as well as filled her nostrils with acrid gas. Still she remained under the partial protection of the saddle and the luggage, cramped painfully on the floor.

The horses, she knew, were running without the help of a guiding rein. Where their heedless course might take them none knew. How long the aged stage could withstand the battering of this wild flight was also subject to grave doubt. But an intense excitement gripped her. A wild thrill.

She had heard of the violence of this new country which had attracted her; read accounts of the sudden death that stalked the far-flung plains like a predatory creature in search of fodder. In her heart of hearts lingered an admiration for the sort of man who greeted his last breath with a smile, who weighed life ever on the scale of chance and who surrendered it only upon the alter of courage.

Such a man was this derelict of the plains, she decided. The sudden appearance of the road agents had brought to the surface all the finer attributes of the man. He stood, now, with his jaw set and fire in his eyes, and she saw him at his best.

"I'm all fer quittin', young fellah," Old Pop kept saying. "Whatever they find here, they kin have. I ain't fer throwin' away my life fer the sake o' a few hun'nerd dollars an' a mail pouch with nothin' much in it."

"Neither am I," the rider snapped, "but I'm double damned if those hellions'll lay a paw on this gal while I got a breath to stop it! You oughta know that, driver!"

The girl thrilled to the sense of protection in the words. She peered upward and saw the strength in the tanned face; contrasted it with the white and tremulous countenance of the aged driver.

"Watch that side, driver," her champion was ordering. "See that they don't ride past us an' reach our hosses."

He punctuated the order with a shot from his smoking pistol, and the girl heard him grunt. There was satisfaction in the sound. Instinctively she felt that his aim, despite the rocking of the stage, had not failed him. She felt a thrill of horror, yet it was tempered inexpressibly by an exultation that was shared by her defender.

After all, if this was a land of six-guns,

it was well to be on the side of those whose six-guns expressed themselves best. As she watched, a splinter appeared suddenly at the edge of the stage door. Tiny particles of wood flew through the air and the girl knew that a bullet had struck there, within a few inches of human bodies. It was like a messenger of death groping spitefully for life upon which to feast.

She shuddered. The terrible realism of it all gripped her. Once again the cowboy fired, then he shouted an order to the older man. The girl saw the rifle raised and heard its deep boom swallow in volume the sharp bark of the revolvers.

"Hit his hoss!" Old Pop snapped excitedly. "Unseated him, shore enough!"

There followed, then, a veritable hail of bullets from the frustrated bandits. They bit deep into the walls of the stage, struck venemously into the sashes of the doors, rattled a chorus of death about the roof of the careening vehicle. Suddenly the lurching of their progress became more pronounced. The stage swung sharply to the right and its speed slowed instantly.

Shouts from outside told that the road agents were pleased at whatever had taken place to bring about this result.

"One of our horses is down," the cowboy said quietly. "Looks like we'll have some more shootin' to do."

Old Pop fired the heavy rifle again and growled sourly as he saw that he had missed. "You only pinked that first fellah," he told the cowboy. "He's up ag'in, an' in the saddle. The one unhorsed is trailin' us ag'in, too. We can't go far this-a-way."

The girl stirred under the piled luggage. Instantly the cowboy glared down at her angrily. "Don't be a damned fool," he cursed her. "Lay there. Lay still. I'll be doin' any preachin' that's done from here on."

The stage was covering ground now in a series of jerks rather than a sustained motion. All too clearly its occupants knew that the one horse remaining upright was reaching the stage of exhaustion from his mad flight across the plains. It seemed that the animal was prancing and rearing in frenzy, rather than running. The stage was moving in circles.

It struck some rut in the ground and the rear right wheel snapped off the axle and went rolling swiftly across the sand to lose momentum and curl in ever narrowing circles into a pile of dust. It might have been a living thing in mad flight from the danger that impended. The dust cloud that settled over it appeared almost like a blanket vainly trying to hide its presence.

The stage dropped, dragged scrapingly through a shower of alkali dirt. The right door flew open from the distortion and the luggage which had served to cover the girl from flying bullets swept in a sea of confusion about the feet of the cowboy. For a second he lost his balance, his feet knocked from beneath him. He fell upon both luggage and girl. In confusion he rose, reached upward through the slanting hatch in a vain attempt to catch the rein and halt the maddened animal.

Old Pop uttered a stifled curse as failure greeted the effort of the rider and the stage pounded on. To the right the bank of a barranca swept gently downward. The rear of the stage slipped over the edge, dug deep into the sand, tipped, and finally, in a welter of flying dust and baggage, stage and horses, rolled over.

For an instant the girl lost consciousness. Falling bags and a terrific bump against the side of her head knocked her sensibilities adrift. It was, doubtless, the exulting shouts of the road agents that brought her to. Either that or the efforts of the strange cowboy to extricate her from the mess. His hands were under her arms and he was lifting her as gently as he could through the tipped door.

"I am—all right—" she faltered up into his face. He was covered with prairie dust. It lay thick upon his hair and his shoulders and on his face; deep imbedded against the roots of his budding beard, it clung close to dots of perspiration that became rivulents and swept over his jaw in soiled and wandering streams.

"I'll say you are, Miss," he grinned, "an' ain't we gettin' acquainted fast?"

There was a dare-devil expression about his face. The girl, dazed and partially terrified as she was, caught the look in his eyes and, much as though she had reverted backward through a thousand generations, saw and loved the sheer joy of combat that this man had cultivated. He was a fighter. She was content to rely upon him.

He laid her gently upon the ground close to the side of the wrecked stage. There she would be safe from flying bullets. She smiled up at him, wanly, weakly, but with a courage as sublime as his own. She was a little thing, he saw, amazingly fragile looking and dainty and beautiful. Across her white shirtwaist the dust lay heavy now, and her bosom heaved with the turmoil of her emotions.

He spoke reassuringly again, his teeth flashing in a smile of confidence. Then he straightened. At the far end of the upturned vehicle Old Pop Reynolds was raising himself to one knee, his long rifle held unsteadily in his hands as he attempted to train it upon the men above the sloping bank of the barranca.

Even as the rider watched, Old Pop suddenly lurched upward in response to a shot fired from no great distance. His form, dusty as was everything else, looked like that of a gray ghost staggering through a distorted world. He half turned, and the rider saw that his eyes were wide and staring, and that between them a blue and gaping hole showed. The long rifle thudded into the dirt at the staggering feet.

Old Pop had driven his last trip. As he fell, showers of the dust rose about his crumpled form, and the rider saw that, stretched prone as he was and staring with wide eyes into the glaring sun, his spreading, colorless mustache twitched and twitched again.

The rider had gazed upon violent and sudden death before. But for the girl he might have accepted the offering of fate with little heed. This was the fortunes of war. But he glanced at the girl. She, too, had seen. He saw her eyes distended with horror, saw her delicate chin and lips tremble, then a convulsive shudder passed over her entire body and she sighed and her eyes abruptly closed. She had fainted.

"We're a-buildin' a Empire, miss," the rider grunted. "I reckon you'll find other folks than genuine pioneers in the land o' the settin' sun an' the bellowin' herds."

When the girl came to herself for the second time, it was to the rhythmic tune of a revolver as it barked its spiteful death call over her prone body. The sun had sunk and its direct rays no longer beat down upon them. But the heat was intense and the fiery fumes of burnt powder lay heavy upon the air.

Beside her sat the rider. She cried out as she saw that his shirt was stained with blood. His face, still set in the deliberate and almost happy smile, was streaked with perspiration and dirt, but back of the ruddy tan there was visible a pallor that spoke volumes for the suffering that was his.

As she watched, he shifted forward to his hands and knees, examined critically the gun he held in his hand, dropped that which had been in his left and crept away from her. His course took him across the floor of the barranca. He crept as though pain lay heavy upon him.

Half way up the sloping bank, he paused as a shot rang out and a spurt of dust beside him bespoke the purpose of the man who had fired. But he did not answer the shot. Only a momentary pause showed in his progress, then he crept on. Once again a shot roared and the girl saw no answering spurt of dust. She wondered if the man had been hit.

But this time he answered. Suddenly, with an almost invisible flirt of his wrist, he fired in return. Then she heard his hoarse laugh and saw him weave upward to his feet and lunge ahead recklessly over the bank and out of sight.

A tremendous concern gripped her, a loneliness and helplessness that overwhelmed her. Without this strange rider near she felt utterly alone, beaten, lost.

She staggered to her feet and went after him, her high leather boots scraping uncertainly through his tracks.

CHAPTER IV

OVER the bank, her face toward the setting sun, the girl fought her sliding way. Then she saw him. The vast plains rolled miles off into the gathering shadows of approaching night and he stood silhouetted against a fading horizon. Perhaps it was some trick of the atmosphere that wrought in her vision an effect of magnification. The form of the man seemed gigantic.

She saw that he still held his gun in his right hand and that he was looking down upon another crumpled form such as that of Old Pop Reynolds. A shudder passed over her shoulders, but she continued upon her way. Some inner urge forced her to proximity with this man who had fought so valiantly for her.

He heard her coming and turned. The sardonic smile swept over his features again. "You shore pick quiet times fer yore sleepin', miss," he grinned.

"I'm—sorry and—ashamed," she said, her voice thick and rasping from the dust in her throat.

"I ain't," he vouchsafed instantly, "I'm right glad. You missed things you wouldn't o' liked over much. We fought it out, damn 'em. They wanted it an' they got it—that's all."

He laughed a little again and swept his arm in a circle. The girl followed the gesture. There had been three of the bandits, and she quickly counted three crumpled forms on the sand of the plains. When she looked at him again she found his gaze upon her. A quizzical expression clung under the grime and sweat of his face. He was weighing the effect the carnage and death would have upon her.

She straightened and fought for the control and courage to meet the situation steadily. "It is horrible," she said, "more horrible than words can say—but I never can repay what you have done. I know you had no personal interest in this fight. You fought it for me. I heard what you said to that driver, poor soul. You fought to defend me."

"Gents that don't have over much o' good women," he drawled, "are right apt to stand by 'em when they do show their faces. I guess what I done, 'most anybody would 'a' done, Miss."

An awkward moment of silence followed. Their eyes met, shifted, wandered meaninglessly over the plains. Slowly they were returning from the abysmal to realization that they were man and girl, alone in the solitudes, and welded together by a series of terrible events.

Off to the right lay the crumpled form of a horse. Still farther away a lone animal stood with dejected mien and flopping ears. Now and then it turned its head toward them, but did not approach. The atmosphere of death had gripped that silent world. Even the beast sensed its presence.

Without another word, the rider turned and went to the dead horse. The girl saw him working at the saddle and shortly he freed a coiled lariat. Without a glance in her direction, he walked slowly toward the standing beast.

The animal watched him warily, pricked up its ears in suspicion as he approached. Then the girl saw the lariat whirl in the air, dart forth with unerring accuracy, and the pony, leaping aside to avoid the imprisoning rope, stepped neatly into the loop. Once the rope circled its neck, the animal did not resist.

The rider stroked its nose and spoke to it gently. Then he coiled the rope and led the little beast toward the girl. Down into the barranca he went, assuming that she would follow. She did. Beside the upturned coach he tethered the moun. From the wreckage he extricated the silver-studded saddle. This he placed over the pony and set the girths.

"Yore saddle," he said a little roughly. "Climb aboard. We got to be a-movin', Miss."

He caught her foot and lifted her up. The animal shied, and the girl had difficulty maintaining her position. He spoke to the pony and quieted it. Then he found her bag and searched about in the wreckage until he came upon the stage water cask. The cask had been broken in the wreck and all that remained of the water it held was a moist spot where the plains dust had eagerly absorbed the fluid.

He grunted casually and turned to the pony.

Catching the reins in his hand, he strode off toward the slope of the barranca and the pony followed. Out onto the plains again with their ghastly evidence of the scene enacted, he led the pony and the girl rider. She looked down over the horse's neck and her eyes feasted upon the breadth of this man's shoulders, upon the tanned neck, showing now, under the brim of his wide hat.

"You are hurt," she said, "your shirt is —stained with—blood."

"I reckon. I just got a scrape, though. We'd better keep goin' along anyhow."

His reticence quieted her. She clung to the saddle and tried ineffectually to recall all that this man had passed through for her sake. Enough she had seen to tell her of the dangers and the hardships of this sort of thing. Four men dead! One staggering along ahead of her fighting with all his strength to take her—where?

Obviously they must spend the night on the plains. Never could they get back to town or on to Waldo. Their progress was slow. After a long time she ventured to speak again.

"Where are we going?" she asked.

"There's water a couple o' miles ahead, miss," he answered. "I reckon we both need it a heap. We'll be makin' fer that."

About them the soft night fell like a shadowy curtain. It blotted out the horizons, cramped the world into a tiny thing no bigger, by vision, than the immediate earth they covered. But it was a grateful darkness because it blotted out also the huddled forms that lay to bleach upon the plains, and it brought into being the tender stars that whispered through the night wind of a fine and a just God and the rightness of things on earth regardless of the doings of mere man.

Something of this impressed itself upon the girl. Reaction set in and she cried softly. The man ahead did not hear. He plodded on like a ghost through the night, and the pony followed, its head drooping and its ears hanging listlessly. Deep within the soul of the girl thoughts and emotions, intangible and inarticulate, stirred and groped their way to consciousness.

There was something about this carousing cowboy, something that rose to the surface to meet the emergency, and she asked herself, after all, what difference human frailty made so long as it was swept aside in such a rush of human strength and courage as he had shown.

When, after what seemed to her an interminable time, they arrived at the waterhole, the man told her to remain in the big saddle while he looked around. She followed him by sound as he trod about the waterhole; heard him gathering material for a small fire, and saw the fire leap into life as he lit a brand and searched carefully about the banks of the pool.

Then he returned and raised his hand to help her from the saddle. She noticed that, when he spoke, his voice was hoarse.

"Git down," he said. "I allus like to look around fer snakes an' the likes afore I let a lady go walkin' 'round too much. I'm used to escortin' ladies around o' nights—you needn't be afraid."

She realized that he was reassuring her as much on the score of his own actions as on any foreign danger that might threaten her. She laughed as lightly as she could.

"I am not a bit afraid—I trust you absolutely—why not?"

"Yeah," he muttered, "why not? Me bein' a first class drunk an' bankrupt—"

"After being so wonderful—don't spoil it all by being silly," she quieted. "I trust you implicitly, my friend. What do you want me to do? I feel quite helpless and shaky."

"Which ain't surprisin'," he agreed. "I'm goin' to build us up a fire. The night'll git right chilly later on. Then I'm goin' to wash up a mite—just a mite—an' drink a heap. I'm thinkin' you kin do both while I'm gatherin' wood—I won't be lookin', miss."

She went to the pool and drank of the sultry but soothing water. It strengthened her. Then she dipped her face and her arms into its cool depths and soaked them. A comfortable lassitude swept

over her. The night about her was immense, soft, tender. She might easily have believed that all the horrible things of that day had been but a dream, and that now she had waked to the beauties of the stars and the quiet of the vast plains.

When she turned away from the water, the fire was burning bright and shadows danced fantastically about the ground near the pool. Beside the flames she saw the form of her defender. His back was turned deliberately toward her, and she knew that she appreciated him and was glad, infinitely glad, that he was there.

She went to him, stood at his side, and about them the night was silent except for the distant howl of a coyote as it ravaged the desert, the faint but shrill chirping of a tree toad among the few cottonwoods near the waterhole.

"You had better drink, cowboy," she said softly. "It has been a terrible day—horror upon horror. You must rest."

He did not answer her verbally. It was as though her words had roused him from the deepest of reveries. He looked down upon her, smiled wanly, and walked to the pool. The girl sat facing the fire. From the direction of the water she could hear the man splashing around. It occurred to her that he was immersing his whole body in the strength-giving water.

He was gone some time, so long, in fact, that a sense of lonliness assailed her. She took to peering into the shadows cast by the fire and their motion assumed dire and weird significances in response to the twitching of her nerves.

Alone with a strange young man who had met her while yet the effects of drunkenness dulled his mind and sapped his energies. Alone with him in the vast solitudes where only emptiness and they two filled the world. Her heart leaped at the thought. She trusted this mighty man of the plains, yet there was enough of fright in her emotions to temper them with thrill.

He came back at last and his face showed clean from his splashings in the pool. But the pallor under his skin persisted, and the girl rose and caught his arm and looked up into his eyes.

"You are hurt, my friend," she said. "I am afraid that you are badly hurt—"

"I ain't," he grunted laconically. "But I'm weak as the liquor in a tabernacle! I reckon I'm bled out, miss. What I got ain't nothin' but a scrape, but she shore bled plenty. It's been hot to-day an' between the bleedin', the heat, an' the liquor, I ain't fit fer a foot race."

He sat down, his long legs crossed before him and, though he smiled again, she saw that he reeled dizzily.

"We have had nothing to eat, either," she said, bending over him solicitously; "you are weak."

"I'll be stretchin' out," he mumbled. When he lay back, the motion was one almost of collapse. She touched his shoulder and found his shirt soaked with the waters of the pool. Realization came to her. The man had washed the shirt; washed the wound under it, then, because he could not bandage it, he had replaced the wet garment that her sensibilities might not be made to suffer.

Before her eyes flashed that picture she had caught of him back at the stage. There he had been the abysmal fighting man which every woman, in her innermost heart, admires. Here he was the tender and thoughtful man whose very modesty exceeded her own!

Her lips trembled and she clamped her teeth. "Sit up," she ordered suddenly. "I want to know where you are hurt."

His lips moved, but the words he tried to speak were snatched away upon the wings of inaudibility. His eyes had closed and the cheeks about them seemed to have sunken deep and taken upon themselves the hue of coma. She slipped her arm under his neck and raised his head. The shirt, open at the throat, fell away and exposed the flesh of his shoulder.

There, between the base of the neck and the round muscle of the shoulder peak, she saw the wound. He had cleaned it well back there in the pool, but she shuddered at the thought of what that cleansing might provoke. The edges of the wound were gaping and dark colored. It seemed to have bled itself out leaving the man weak from the loss of blood, his

heart pounding in an effort to thrive on too little lubrication.

A soft cry escaped her lips. She was utterly helpless. Yet something must be done. With the strength of a man she tore the soggy shirt from his body. His deep chest lay exposed to the soft prairie winds. Then she tore free both sleeves of her white shirt-waist and of them made bandages. He did not stir while she made a compress, soaked it in the water of the pool, and bound it over his hurt. His eyes did not open.

Once she laid her head close to his breast and listened with bated breath for his heart beat. When she heard it, regular but weak, she cried out softly again. Her work finished, she moved pieces of the burning wood closer to him; started a new fire where its heat would warm him. The tree toad sang a soft song of encouragement. The coyote yelped a taunting litany of defeat.

Once the hobbled horse wandered close to her and stood watching. She looked at the animal, saw his dejected manner. It wanted its master, that silent crumpled master, that lay out on the plains. The girl wept softly, for want of something better to do, and lifted the head of the wounded man into her lap and stroked his hair fearfully.

Once he stirred, reaching a jerking hand upward to the wound and let his fingers trail there. Then his eyes opened and he sensed his position, felt the white bandage, saw the bare arm of the girl as she held his head. He smiled faintly, and in the dreamiest of voices muttered:

"Damned if you ain't a game little sport, at that!"

CHAPTER V

ALL through that silent night the girl kept her lonely vigil. At times weariness overcame her and her head sagged close to that of the man, and she dozed. But when the coyote yelped, or the wood of the little fire crackled vociferously, she would wake with a start and her hand would take to stroking the hair of the man again.

Clarity of thought came to her in those silent and lonely hours. She saw that, from the gasping breath of exhaustion, the breathing of the rider had altered into that of more normal sleep. Rest was getting in its work. It came to her that this, perhaps, was the first sleep the man had enjoyed in several days.

Doubtless on his drinking bout he had scoffed at sleep and gone on to the verge of exhaustion before his money had run out and he started the trip to Waldo. Sleep was what he needed. It showed in his improved and deeper breathing.

She wondered who he was, what his name was, where he had made his business starts, and what the mighty story back of his two failures could be. She had seen enough of him to realize that he had not laid down the glove of surrender without the bitterest of battles. By what hideous warfare of the plains had his soul been scarred? By what shrieking of hot lead had his emotions been distorted?

In his smile there was infinite cynicism. Doubtless his character had been heated under the lash of hatred and battle and, while susceptible to molding, had been shaped with the tools of brutality and violence. His heart, mayhap, was as hard as the steel of his mighty guns.

But no. Not with that sense of the niceties that had bade him suffer the folds of a soggy shirt over a raw wound. Not with the consideration which had prompted him to reassure the girl of her safety in his hands. He was a mystery.

Dawn shot its arrows through the blanket of night and the east grayed under its magic touch. The cries of the coyote faded and the song of the vociferous tree toad lapsed into a sleepy welcome to day. Still the man slept. Deeply, now, his chest heaving steadily and his entire body wrapped in the complete relaxation of slumber.

Day came. As though a curtain gradually were drawn back disclosing the golden brown of the plains, light swept its magic presence across the world and a hundred yards away the girl saw the fleet form of an elk as it waited hopefully for the presence of man to cease

at the pool where it wished to drink.

Hunger made itself felt. She wondered what this day would bring forth. The man certainly needed the sustaining strength of food. She felt weak herself. Her nerves were writhing under the lash of recollection and she fought gamely to combat the undermining reaction which threatened to set in upon the heels of her harrowing experiences of the day before.

It was broad day when she waked the man. Far off, from the direction of Coyote Springs, she caught sight of horsemen. There were five of them and they came across the plains at a sharp canter.

"Someone is coming," she told the sleeping man, "you had better wake up."

He sat erect at once, ran a hand across his brows and grinned. "I feel great," he said, "hope you had a good sleep."

"Enough," she answered.

Then he regarded himself and his face flushed. He inspected the bandage and understanding came to him. His face sobered at once, but he did not speak. The girl was pointing toward the approaching horsemen.

"They will help us," she told him, "they will have food. You are in need of that most of all."

He glanced steadily at the horsemen, a sardonic smile playing over his face. Then he shrugged carelessly, cynically, and the gesture hurt his wounded shoulder. He ran a hand over the bandage and his fingers came in contact with the gold pin which the girl had taken from her throat to fasten the folds of the cloth. His jaw set. Without a word he walked to the pool and splashed water over his hands and face, snorting in evident enjoyment of the process. When he returned he said: "Fit as a fiddle, miss. I reckon we'll eat them riders out'n their rations entire!"

The girl saw that the men were coming on at a gallop, now. It was clear that they had seen the movement of her hero by the waterhole and knowledge of their presence there had spurred the riders ahead. They came close, circled toward the north, and for the first time the girl saw that they had their guns in hand.

"They think we are the bandits that held up the stage!" she cried in fretful anger. "Are they fools?"

"No miss," the rider said slowly," I reckon they're callin' themselves sheriffs. That first one, on the roan, is Biff Zello from Waldo way. He's the sheriff an' a meaner cuss never lived. What he knows would fill a book that nobody'd dare print, I reckon!"

The girl looked at him inquiringly and saw that he had raised his arms above his head and was beckoning the riders to come in. They came warily, and the man Zello cursed roundly as he saw the girl there.

"What the hell yuh up to now, Morgan?" he demanded roughly. "If you've harmed a hair of that gal's head we'll swing yuh where yuh belong!"

"You idiots!" the girl exclaimed in anger. She was about to say more, but the rider interrupted.

"We're still on the plains, miss," he said calmly. "I reckon I better do the talkin'." Then he turned to the sheriff of Waldo and his tones drawled tauntingly as he addressed the man: "I reckon I ain't hurt her so much that she couldn't gobble a snack o' grub, Zello. You might try her out on that."

The sheriff ordered two of his men to dismount and go to the girl. She drew back from them and her hand instinctively caught the arm of the rider called Morgan. Zello, seeing the turn affairs were taking, cut in with a bluff and hearty voice.

"That there is Seth Morgan, ma'am," he told her. "A sure-shootin' hellion if ever one lived. This here county has been a lead foundry since he showed up. We been tryin' tuh git him fer sometime. This stage hold-up an' them killin's will about settle his hash."

The girl felt Morgan's arm tighten at the words, but when he spoke his voice was softer than ever and his drawl the most deliberately tantalizing she had ever heard. "Ain't that the truth, now, Biff?" he sneered. "So you reckon I held up the stage, eh?"

"We know damned well you did!" the

sheriff shouted. "Git his iron, there, Crazer. Lift his hardware plenty." He turned to the girl: "It's a wonder this hellion ain't done you hurt, miss. He's a bad actor!"

"This man is hurt, you fools!" the girl cried angrily. "Last night I thought he might die—"

"Ah, that explains it," Zello chortled. "Yuh can thank a lucky star that he is, miss. Otherwise he'd of been hisself!"

With a cry of anguish and helplessness combined, the girl threw her arms across Morgan's chest as the man Crazer approached to disarm him. She refused to let him near. Zello ordered her roughly aside and Crazer stepped close and laid his hand upon her arm none too gently. She whirled and crashed the palm of her hand full against his rough face. He stepped back, angered and surprised.

"Yuh damned hussy!" he bellowed, and started to step toward her once more.

"I wouldn't, Crazer," Morgan snapped steadily. The man stopped.

"If you're takin' me in as a bandit, Zello," Morgan said casually, "come an' git me. I reckon I'll have some kind o' a trial an' this gal will tell the truth—"

"You held up that stage no matter what this fool gal says!" Zello charged heatedly. "We got the goods on you plenty, Morgan. The three men you killed outside pore old Reynolds are all men ownin' ranches hereabouts! They're above suspicion."

"Did you happen to notice they was all masked?" Morgan queried sardonically.

"You found a way to fix that!" Zello snarled. "It was all a part o' yore scheme. You went broke in the Even Chance, got steamed on booze, an' rode the stage out to do just what you done. We can see through it all. When them ranchers tried to give yuh what was comin' yore way by rights, yuh managed to kill 'em off like rats. We ain't sayin' you ain't a grand gun-slinger, young fellah—but we *are* sayin' yore gun-slingin' days is over!"

"Hell!" grunted the rider— "Be a man an' cook this here gal some grub."

Over the fire by which the girl had spent her long night, two of the men prepared crisp bacon and coffee. It was not food that would delight the taste of the epicure, but it gave strength to the girl just to catch its fragrant aroma.

Straight from the frying pan the bacon was brought her. She took a piece in her fingers, ate it ravenously. She noticed that none was offered Morgan. She asked about it.

"He won't need any," Zello laughed harshly. "Food would be wasted on him, ma'am. Before noon he'll be eatin' the roots o' prairie grass!"

"You may string me up out here, Zello," Morgan said steadily, "but if I git any sort o' a trial you never will hold me ten seconds after the evidence is in!"

"You'll get a trial," the girl said sharply. "I do not know who these men are, and I do not care! You'll get a trial or every one of them, though, will pay a price they'll never forget. I never heard of such a dastardly thing as this in all my life! If you still think this man is a criminal, arrest him. Try him. I am the only witness to what happened. I never saw this man before yesterday. Would I lie for him? Take him to Waldo —try him!"

Zello saw the force of her argument. Much as he would have liked to carry matters with a high hand, he dared not so long as this girl stood her ground. He gave way gracelessly. "Oh, we'll try him, all right," he growled. "He'll git the fairest trial ever a man had. That's what'll hang him!"

"I'm thinking different," the girl said hotly. "We'll see." She snatched the frying pan from the man who held it and carried it to Morgan.

"Eat," she said steadily. "Before these men I want you to know this: you are the finest man and the bravest I ever have met. I wouldn't trade your little fingernail for all the other men here. Let them say what they please, do what they please. You are so far above them they are ants by comparison.

"I don't care what they say of you. I don't care what you may have done in the past. I am your friend and I'm happy to be your friend and proud you are mine!"

Morgan smiled, his face flushed. Sud-

denly he stuck out his hand and the girl caught it, man-fashion. The grip was a warm one.

"You're about the best little gal I ever crossed up with, miss," the rider told her. "By all odds, the best. I'm shore yore friend an' you can be sure of that. As fer what these bewhiskered prairie rats has to say about me, I ain't particular, myself."

"Stow that chow away," Zello ordered them roughly. "There ain't no fool on earth like a female fool! Crazer—git that hoss. You, Morgan, climb into the saddle. Here, miss, I'll let you ride up front with me—"

Morgan went obediently to the horse with his silver saddle cinched in place. But the girl did not go to Zello. She cast him a glance that spoke volumes, then followed the rider to the horse he had captured from the bandits. When he had mounted, she stood at his side and looked up at him:

"I'm riding with you," she said. "Can you make room?"

He helped her into the saddle, sat behind her with his arms about her sides holding the reins and her soft hair blowing back against his face. Thus they rode across the plains in the direction of Waldo, the sheriff and his posse keeping a warlike vigil around them.

"You are Seth Morgan," the girl whispered back to him. "I heard them call you that. I am Sally Mirdon—my Uncle Jim Mirdon ranches near Waldo. I am going to him."

"Jim Mirdon is a big rancher," Morgan told her. "A fine man, too. But I don't think this here is country fer the likes of you, Sally."

"Just the same, Seth, it is," she said firmly. "Any country that can breed men as good, and as bad, as the men I've seen is a country that can do anything it sets its hands to."

"There ain't so many good ones out here," he said cynically.

"I know one," she snapped.

"I ain't good," he assured her. "Gawd knows that I ain't that!"

"Maybe I meant my Uncle Jim, Seth," Sally answered. He flushed and squirmed.

"O' course," he growled. Her hair was spraying his face with a million caresses.

"Maybe," she said. Then they rode in silence.

CHAPTER VI

AS a town, Waldo laid claim to greater distinction than Coyote Springs. It was bigger, both as to population and area. Perhaps, because it lay beside a winding and navigable river, and thus was a center at which river boats and overland wagon trains could meet, it had early assumed a more metropolitan atmosphere.

At Waldo there appeared from time to time traveling troups of show people. There was always an arrival or a departure of interest, and the town caught no little share of the wild celebrations staged by cowboys and ranchers and desert wanderers who had become fed up on the solitudes and the loneliness of the open spaces and came to the haunts of man where liquor flowed free, to vent their pent up festive notions. Waldo was a live place.

But never in its history, perhaps, had a more unusual or solemn caravan reached the town than this in which rode Seth Morgan and Sally Mirdon. Zello, an air of vast importance about him, headed the line. Behind him, penned in by deputies on each side and bringing up the rear, rode the man and the girl.

The street of the town was wide and ambling of nature. It was, inevitably, lined on either side by adobe house with falsefronts of board. Hitching rails ran in unequal altitudes along the edge of the dirt street. On porches of saloons, and there were many of the latter, men lounged.

Here and there were relics of the previous night's festivities. Tomato cans with gaping bullet holes shot through their gaudily colored paper wrappers, were to be seen. In the center of the town gnarled tree stumps upon which reposed shattered oil lamps attested a forgotten metropolitan touch. Lights had proved too inviting a target for imbibing cowboys.

As the riders approached the town, feet dropped thumpingly from veranda rails and voices called out to unseen humans to come witness the procession. A sense of conspicuousness gripped the girl. Her torn waist, the circumstances surrounding her appearance in this strange town, the staring men, all conspired to confuse and embarrass her.

Seth Morgan resented this. With his innate and surprising delicacy, he made that clear to the girl: "Some day, Sally," he said, "this galoot is goin' to pay han'-some fer this outrage. From now on it's him or me!"

Her hand rested lightly on his arm and he felt the pressure of her fingers as an understanding response. She, too, had sensed the distorted make-up of this Waldo sheriff. Biff Zello impressed her as base, not alone for the things he had done to Seth Morgan, but because of his gestures, his manner of speaking and the instinctive analytical power she, as a woman possessed.

"Was Jim Mirdon goin' to meet you, Sally?" Seth was asking.

"He was to meet the stage," the girl said. "That was due hours ago. I do hope he is here."

"Hell will pop if he is," Seth assured her.

Zello took them straight to the little jail. There he ordered them to dismount. He said to the girl: "There ain't a thing in the world wrong with you, Miss. I know you're Jim Mirdon's niece. Jim started us out on this hunt fer you when the stage failed to arrive las' night. We went to Coyote Springs, heard the story there, then split into two parties an' rode hell-bent to locate you.

"Jim led the party goin' the other way, him thinkin' that mebbe this hellion had stole you. He'll be a-showin' here in town right soon onless I'm wrong. In the meantime, I'm right happy tuh turn yuh over to my wife. She'll make yuh comf'ble till yore uncle gits hyar—"

"You are locking this man up?" Sally asked steadily.

"Shore as shootin'! Yuh got him all wrong, Miss. He's a shootin' fool, this man. We'll be stowin' him away an' gittin' a saw-bones to patch him up to keep fer a first-class hangin'!"

"Then lock me up too," the girl snapped. "Wherever he goes, I go. I have never seen as big a fool as you in all my life!"

Something of a crowd had gathered about them and at this remark a number of the men burst into guffaws of laughter at Zello's expense. He glared about at them, hot anger in his eyes and face. They quieted. He was a man of power in the town.

"Do as yuh please," he snapped at the girl.

The two were then led into the little building which consisted of a short hall and two cells. Morgan went unhesitatingly into the first of the cells, the door was shut behind him and, with great ostentation, Zello snapped a heavy lock. Sally Mirdon stood waiting in the hall. Zello hesitated, scratched his head thoughtfully.

"Biff," Morgan said evenly from his cell, "I want you an' the rest o' yore tribe to hear this, an' understand it. If you turn a key behind that gal I'm goin' to kill you fer it some day. Git all the witnessess you can, mister, 'cause that rides straight through to the last shot. Shore as blazin' hell I'll kill you, Biff, if you do that!"

Zello blustered. "How does that sound to yore ladylike ears?" he demanded exultantly of Sally. "How is that? Ain't that just what I named him? He's a murderin' hound dawg! It ain't that he scares me a mite—but there ain't no reason why I should lock yuh up—"

"I go where he goes," Sally repeated. "and when my uncle gets here, I'll tell him my story. It will lack nothing in detail, Mister Sheriff!"

"I'll stand by his cell an' see that he don't git out, Biff," one of the deputies suggested nervously. "Jim'll be right het up over this thing."

"Do that," Zello grunted. "Leave the lady do as she likes, but watch that gun-fannin' hellion plenty, Bill."

So it ended. The door of the jail was

closed and Sally sat inside it. Zello took good care to see that it was not locked against the girl. Morgan smiled sardonically at that. The deputy remained on watch, but he made it clear that his heart was only half in the proceedings. He was courtesy itself to Sally Mirdon.

"First," the girl said, "tell me the best doctor in town and where I can reach him at once."

"There ain't but one," the deputy apologized. "He'll be here any second, Miss. Zello is shore to send him a-runnin'. If he don't, the doctor'll come out of curiosity. Everybody's been hearin' about yore comin' out yere. Jim is mighty proud. He expects yuh tuh love this country, but I'm damned if I see how yuh can!"

"I've certainly been royally entertained since getting here," the girl said pointedly. "But do not think that I am one to be frightened off very easily."

"They even nick-named yuh Sally o' the city," the deputy said, "an' Jim has been braggin' about how quick you'll take to this range life."

"You can tell those who named me that," the girl said, "that they may as well change it to Sally of the sage, right now!" As she spoke she was looking at Seth Morgan and she did not miss the smile of satisfaction that spread over his face at the words. The deputy nodded and grinned approval.

"Now tell me where the best restaurant in town is," Sally demanded.

"That's a cinch," the guard grunted. "Go to Mother Spaling's a few doors down the street, Miss."

Sally turned to Morgan. "When the doctor comes," she ordered, "see that your wound is treated properly. In the meantime, I'll have a real breakfast here for you in a matter of minutes."

"Thanks," Seth acknowledged, "it wouldn't go bad. An' if you're thinkin' o' givin' a gent a real banquet, have somebody bring me the makin's of a smoke, please."

When Sally returned with a steaming platter of food, the doctor was putting the finishing touches to his treatment of Seth's wound. The medical man assured the girl that the affair was not serious and that it would heal quickly, leaving no ill effects.

He stood by regarding her as she aided Seth to eat his meal. The evident satisfaction the man found in the food was attested by the vivid manner in which he ate it. The doctor, inspired doubtless by his experiences and the nature of them, looked upon the two knowingly. He said nothing.

When Seth had rolled his smoke and was puffing contentedly, the girl resumed her seat outside his cell. She left the jail door open and a warm wind from the plains wafted the smoke of his cigarette between the bars and off into oblivion. Silence came between them, but it was an understanding silence.

Sally sat in the jail door, looking off toward the center of the town. The guard puffed uncertainly at his smoke, now and then pacing the narrow hall outside Seth's cell. The prisoner seemed the least affected of them all.

With the appearance of each horseman, Sally's hope rose. She had a feeling that all this fiasco would come to an abrupt, perhaps a violent end, when she had told her Uncle Jim the whole story. She wanted him to come to her; longed for him beyond expression.

But the sun was high and hot when he did come. Then she saw him, accompanied by three other men, riding hard toward town. He was coming down the same trail they had come, and she assumed that he had searched a wide circle of the plains and was now driving toward town in hope of news.

She saw him bring his mount to a sliding stop before one of the adobe buildings, saw a man run to his side and gesture excitedly, at the same time pointing toward the jail. Then her Uncle Jim spurred his fagged horse and came toward her. She rose and stood in the open, waving at him.

He shouted when he saw her, snatched his hat and waved a joyous greeting. In a matter of seconds he was at her side, his pony circling near at hand, dust still filling the air from his thrilled greeting of the girl. He caught her in his arms

and, at that embrace, the feminine of Sally Mirdon overwhelmed her. She rested her face against his huge chest and cried.

"Where is he?" Mirdon kept asking of the girl. "Show me where he is, child. Just show me, then leave me with him."

"Who?" she asked. "Zello?"

"Damn Zello," Jim Mirdon bellowed. "Show me this Morgan rat! He's the man I'm achin' to talk to, child!"

"I reckon I'm right here, Mirdon," Morgan called out. "It's plumb safe to come in an' start shootin', too. I ain't got a gun!"

"You too?" Sally Mirdon sobbed. "Oh, Uncle Jim, are you like all the rest? Seth Morgan is the best friend I ever had—without him I'd be dead—maybe worse—!"

Mirdon recoiled and looked down at the girl. Before she could tell him all that happened, Biff Zello and his deputies returned from the town. They gathered about the two, and Biff immediately went into a wild story of his capture of the man Morgan at the waterhole.

The yarn lost nothing in the telling. Zello made very clear his belief that Sally owed her safety entirely to the fact that Seth had been wounded. Mirdon seemed swayed between two fires. For a time the girl had interrupted the sheriff repeatedly to brand his statements and his inferences as atrocious lies. At last she desisted and stood patiently by until the man had finished his story. Then she spoke:

"Uncle Jim," she said earnestly, "all of that is the most awful misunderstanding—or worse—that I have ever heard. Seth Morgan was all that a man who was noble and fine and brave could be. He had nothing to do with the hold-up."

Then, in detail, she told everything that had happened. Her story, of course, rang with the genuine conviction of truth. The crowd swayed quickly to her side and that of Morgan. When she had finished, she knew that she was believed. Her uncle's jaw was set like concrete and his eyes glowed with the fire of understanding. The crowd broke into cheers for the girl, and these quickly altered to cheers for the man in jail.

Mirdon whirled to Zello. "Looks like you're crazy, Biff!" he growled. "You batter up the man that saved my gal!"

"Knowin' that Morgan as you do, Jim," the sheriff complained, "you ain't believin' o' this cock-and-bull story?"

"Ain't believin' the word o' this gal?" Mirdon roared. "You're damned tootin' I'm a-believin' o' it, Biff. An' any that has the will to doubt it kin settle with me this second!"

Zello drew back, his face twisted with rage and humiliation.

"Let that chap outa jail, yuh lop-eared burro!" Mirdon snapped. "Sheriff er no sheriff, I guess yuh don't need to be told the kind o' a case yuh got against him!"

More cheers. A concerted rush toward the jail. Zello whined again, told Mirdon that he had done only what he thought was right. But he produced the keys and released Morgan. The hero of the hour stood before the jail and accepted Mirdon's thanks with a calm shake of the hand. Then he turned to Zello.

"You an' me are enemies, Biff," he said calmly. "Be rememberin' of that." Zello paled at the tone he used.

"Come out to the ranch, Seth," Jim Mirdon urged. "I been hearin' that things ain't goin' too well fer you. Mebbe a job would help along. It's waitin' fer you, lad."

"I don't want a job, Jim," Morgan said evenly. "Not right now, leastways. But I'm comin' to the ranch right enough! It's a bit of a talk I'm wantin' most."

They started toward their horses. Morgan grinned and admitted that he had no mount.

"Get him a horse, Uncle Jim," Sally urged, "get him the best horse in town, please. I'll pay for it. It's a present to him from me, Uncle Jim. He can know through the animal my appreciation for all that he has done. And get him his silver saddle back, too!"

"I reckon you bought that, Sally," Morgan smiled frankly.

"I did. And I give it to you now, just as I intended to."

"From you, Sally," the rider said evenly, "I'll be takin' that saddle because there ain't another anywhere just like it."

"Done!" the girl laughed. "And let me say, Seth Morgan, that nowhere else is there a man just like you to ride the saddle."

There was an immense sincerity in the words, but the man seemed not to notice, evaded the deeper note, and turned aside the remark in a bantering way: "That," he grunted, "is a mighty good thing, I reckon. Ask Zello."

The girl laughed scornfully, but there was a look of doubt upon her face. Perhaps, in the deeper reaches of her heart, there were faint mutterings which told that she would have delighted in a look of confusion on the tanned face. He had seemed immune to her frank and glowing tribute. She did not like that.

CHAPTER VII

THE Diamond M was Jim Mirdon's ranch, and there were those who were frank in saying that it was well named. Especially, they said, the Diamond portion of the name was well chosen. It had been portentous. Diamonds associate themselves with value and riches; the ranch had the former, while Jim Mirdon had unquestionably taken from the place the latter.

He was a man well respected by those who knew him; a man to whom none begrudged success, because of the uses to which he put it. Every man who had ever forked a saddle for the Diamond M was fulsome in his praises of the place and the man who owned and operated it.

"A hard man, at times," they were apt to say, "and during roundup and branding, a driver. But square. Square as ever a man was and willing to lend a hand to anybody from a neighboring rancher to a wandering cowhand without so much as a cayuse to carry him through life."

Seth Morgan knew of Mirdon and knew of his fine reputation. At one time, the success of this man had been a subject of suspicion to him. Whereas rustlers had driven Seth himself from business on two separate occasions, Mirdon had always remained strangely free from their operations.

But that thought had come to the young man during the days when he was in the throes of despair. Failure, after skilled and hard labor, was a hard pill for him to take. Add to that bitter situation the fact that he had fought time and again at risk of his life, to beat off marauding gangs and, when he seemed to have established himself, the local bank had deliberately called his loan, and Seth's suspicions of anyone and everyone can be understood.

But the manner of Mirdon when he had greeted his niece and the way the man responded to her story and spoke to Zello about it, had wiped out any suspicions Seth retained. He had decided, in that moment at the jail, to follow a course long in his mind. This was his first chance to speak of the thoughts which he had and he leaped at it, impulsively deciding to trust Mirdon the limit.

So the three rode out to the Diamond M. Mirdon, it was plain, sensed the deep thought that occupied the young rider. He also, as was evident by his frequent and inquiring glances at the girl, suspected her feeling toward this Lothario of the plains whose wooing had been done through the use of thrilling heroism and gunpowder. Surely, the rancher mused, Sally Mirdon had been introduced to the callous part of this new country first!

The Diamond M was but six or eight miles from town and they made the trip in good time. Though Seth had never been at the ranch before, he was not at all surprised at what he saw. The huge and rambling house set beneath the limbs of giant cottonwoods, with snug and well-kept outhouses for tools, equipment and work shops. There was the ever present bunkhouse, and Seth had never seen a bigger or more comfortable one.

Every fence about the property was in fine repair; all the houses had the tidy look of being well-kept; the grazing cattle they had passed on the ride were sleek and fat, and two riders, who had seen them, waved their hats in cheery greeting and showed by their every move the

regard in which Mirdon and his niece were held.

But Seth said nothing of the thoughts in his mind while the girl was there. Mirdon, sensing that his diffidence toward speech had to do with Sally, kept a close mouth. As they neared the great ranch house this became increasingly easier, because the girl was wildly interested in things and asked a million questions which Mirdon answered happily and with pride of tone.

"You said back in town," the rancher told her once, "that we could change your name to Sally of the sage. Gal, if that there works out so's you really can be happy, I'll be the happiest man on earth!"

"It will!" Sally assured him. "I know that all the men out here are not bandits and killers, Uncle Jim. I know that. And these wonderful plains with their limitless distances and their gorgeous sunsets and dawns will suit me forever. I'm dreadfully sick of the city, and city ways, Uncle Jim. There is too much of unhappiness to remind me—"

The rancher leaned over and patted her hand tenderly.

"I'll try mighty hard to make up fer it, child," he promised. "This country is open an' a mite raw, but it's God's country, an' I'm thinkin' you'll like it."

Morgan had listened to this talk with growing wonderment. It was plain that in the words lay imbedded a tale of sorrow which had driven the girl West. Later he learned that her father had been in the business of manufacturing chemicals and, in a factory explosion, had lost his life. The shock had killed her mother.

As yet, Morgan had not attempted in any wise to analyze his feelings toward this beautiful girl. He knew that he had never seen anyone at all like her; knew that she was as charming and beautiful and dainty as anything on earth—but that was all. Now, though, he felt an urge of sympathy toward her that made him yearn to serve her even more.

At the ranch house they were met by a yellow cook whose attempts to be amazingly courteous in his welcome of the new inhabitant of the house were earnest enough to be funny. It broke the strain of the meeting between Sally and Mirdon's wife. That buxom lady, ever a favorite with all at the ranch, had been perilously close to tears as she folded the girl to her spacious bosom.

But she took her quickly in charge and showed her the room that had been set aside for her. The presence of Sally at the ranch would be a vast boon to Mrs. Mirdon. There are times when a woman must, if she would know genuine happiness, talk only to another woman.

Mirdon changed after the women had left them. His manner became crisp and he turned to Seth with an air of business in his tones.

"You wanted to talk, young fellah," he said. "You bein' o' this country the same as me, you'll onderstand my not tryin' to tell you how I feel about what you done fer the gal—"

"Exactly," Morgan grinned. "I done, Mr. Mirdon, the same thing you woulda done if you was there. That's all. We'll let that drop, if you please, sir, an' git down to business."

"We'll let it drop, Morgan," Mirdon agreed, "until a chance comes along fer me to prove to yuh that it ain't been dropped."

"I'll give you the chance in half an hour," Morgan said steadily. "But it won't be fer me alone that you're doin' somethin'."

"I got a little office here," the rancher said, "we kin talk in there."

The little office proved to be a huge room covered with trophies of the plains. Elk head, a puma skin, deer heads and firearms of an ancient vintage served to decorate the place and against one wall stood a huge oak desk upon which were piled somewhat dusty papers. Beside the desk stood a huge chair made of the rough limbs of cottonwoods.

The rancher seated himself at the desk and motioned Seth to take the big chair. Then he offered long, black cigars. Seth declined with a grin.

"I'll roll one, if yuh don't mind," he grunted. The rancher nodded. When both were smoking comfortably, the older

man looked up by way of signifying that he was ready to listen. Seth cleared his throat and spoke:

"You know my record," he said by way of preface; "I reckon you've had me down fer a gun-fanner."

"There's been talk like that. Reports was pretty general."

"I reckon. Well, I ain't a gun-fanner, Jim. I'm a very ord'nary puncher that tried to break through the circle you big guys have built up around the cattle business in these parts!"

"I ain't part ner parcel to any circle," Mirdon protested. "I ain't ever cut a price, or called a loan or done a thing to keep another man out, Morgan."

"I believe that, now," Seth agreed. "I never did before."

"You thought I was crooked?" Jim Mirdon asked, his face going a bit red at the broad terms he used.

"I wasn't sure you wasn't," Morgan snapped audaciously.

"Basin' yore ideas on what?"

"The plain fact that no rustlers ever seemed to bother you none," Seth persisted. "They drove me out twice. Broke me so clean I got only eight hun'nerd bucks fer all I had when they finished me last time," he explained. "That eight hun'nerd I blew clean an' complete at the Even Chance!"

Mirdon pursed his lips thoughtfully and the wrinkles about his eyes went deeper. He puffed ruminatively at his black cigar. Seth regarded the man for a moment, then went on:

"They beat me, Mirdon—drove me out twice. But they let you alone though you had a hun'nerd head to every yearlin' I ever owned. How do you account for that?"

"I'm big," the rancher said. "I've got a bunch o' riders on this range that'll play hell with anybody that busts things up. They know that."

Seth Morgan had been placid until that moment. As the rancher spoke, his chin set, however, and his eyes flashed. Without any hint of boastfulness, he said, "You're big, Mirdon, that's a fact. But your riders don't mean a thing. There ain't any two o' them, good as they are, that'll give that gang the fight I gave 'em!

"That where all these reports about me bein' a gun-fanner came from. I played hell with 'em. I'll continue to play hell with 'em from now on. Just because I'm down is no sign I'm out!"

"Startin' a gun war around these diggin's is bad business," the rancher said slowly. There was concern in his voice. Old ranger though he was, he had come to that point in life and possessions where things had shown themselves to him in a different and more complacent way. He saw the menace of riled passions among the men of the ranges. He longed for calm and the business of commercial activity.

"I reckon," Morgan smiled wrily, "that them hellions has found that out fer themselves!"

"It don't pay in the long run," the rancher insisted. "I'm tellin' you, Seth, that I'd rather have anythin' else onder the sun than the reputation o' bein' a gunfighter supreme. It's the most dangerous occupation on the plains."

"I won't be drove off, Mirdon! There's one thing I'd rather talk about than bein' a gunfighter, though. I want to call a few things to yore attention. First off, they let you alone. They weren't afraid o' yore riders, Jim, 'cause I gave 'em merry hell myself. It was somethin' else. They knew you had the power an' the money to trace 'em down an' show 'em up!

"They knew I didn't. Once I was broke, they did not fear me. They run things with a pretty high hand."

"You think there's a gang operatin' on the smaller ranchers?"

"I'm as sure of it as I am o' my name!" Morgan snapped. "It speaks fer itself."

"It does look a wee mite funny," Mirdon admitted reluctantly.

"Good. Now, with that fer a starter, Jim," Morgan went on firmly, "think this over: I killed three men on the plains the other day. Do you think I'm a road agent? Do you think I held up that stage?"

"I know damned well you didn't!" Mirdon proclaimed vehemently.

"Good. Then, if I didn't—who did? Who were the three men killed in the fightin'?" He leaned forward and pounded the palm of one hand with the fist of the other that his words might carry greater emphasis: "Those same three men musta done it, Jim. There's nobody else!"

"That's the truth, shore as hell!" Mirdon growled.

"An' all three of 'em are fairly well known around Waldo!" Seth snapped "Two o' them run ranches an' do a mighty satisfactory business in cattle, Jim. The other runs that saloon called the Palace o' Joy! How come they're banditin' around the plains?"

Mirdon's face was a study. He saw the inevitable truth of Seth's statements, yet he could not accredit them. They seemed too altogether preposterous. Yet he was faced by the indisputable facts, and, while his mind was in a turmoil, Seth capitalized his advantage by showing a certain weakness in his own theory:

"There's a sour spot in that mystery, though," he admitted. "Why should them fellahs hold up pore old Pop Reynolds an' his rickety stage? There's a reason somewhere, Jim, but I admit I can't lay a finger on it—I got an idea, though. An' that's why I wanted to talk to you about it.

"Was there, or was there not, somethin' expected to arrive on that stage that woulda been worth stealin', Jim? You're big in this country an' you kin find out. I can't."

The answer to the question lay in Mirdon's face as Seth asked it. His eyes dilated with sudden and forceful understanding. His hands set up an excited dancing on the desk before him. Seth smiled.

"You already answered," he smiled. "There was somethin', somethin' you know about right now. I reckon my theory ain't so damned bad at that, Jim!"

"It ain't!" Jim Mirdon exploded. "By the livin', howlin' coyotes o' seven hells, it ain't! There was a money shipment due. I'm chairman o' the Rancher's Benefit Association, as yuh know. That was all talked over last meetin', an' the cash to pay off three mortgages was due here on the stage you rode, Seth!"

"Good. Now—who knew thet? Who is there, mebbe among the three dead men, that's a member o' that association, Jim?"

"Blenken," Mirdon admitted hoarsely, "Blenken, the rancher, is a member an' he knew about the shipment."

"Well—I reckon Blenken got hisself killed tryin' to steal that cash," Seth said laconically. "How come the shipment wasn't made?"

"At the last minute, the mortgages were renewed, Seth. I handled that as chairman of the association, an' I was goin' to report on it at the next meetin'."

"A lot is explained," Seth Morgan sighed in satisfaction. "Now, Jim, you feel like I stood by yore gal in a bad pinch, don't you?"

"I sure do, Seth. I'll never forgit that, either."

"Then you kin repay me right now. If my idees has been good up to now, lemme use some more o' them, Jim. Here's my plan: I'll prove to you that there is a gang a-workin' here an' that they're big people in the town, too.

"I ain't got a dime, Jim. Not a dime. I owe Sally nine bucks fer that saddle she give back to me! But I kin beat this bunch at their own game if you'll help me. We kin clean them out plenty if you really want to do that."

"I do! I'll play the game right to the last card, Seth!"

"Good. Try this here on yore piano, then: S'posin' that you reward me fer what I done fer the gal by givin' me a fresh start in the cattle business? S'posin' that you hand me a thousand acres an' two hun'nerd head o' cattle as a reward, an' s'posin' I take 'em?

"Here's what'll happen, Jim Mirdon: The gang'll start right in on me ag'in. Then, if yore riders stand by an' we drop down on 'em plenty, we'll be seein' who's who an' what of it.

"Just as soon as we prove up, I'll give yuh yore cattle back, an' yore land, too."

"I'll do it, Seth. Take that tract over on the Snake River. It's good land an'

water, an' we been sort o' lettin it catch hold ag'in fer new grazin' land. Drive the steers over whenever you're ready an' say the word. I'll pick twenty o' my men that can keep their mouths shut an' who love a fight. We'll give 'er a whirl."

Seth Morgan laughed in delight. So excited and pleased was he at the prospects ahead that he winked happily at Mirdon and asked: "Didn't it strike yuh as at all funny that Zello was fair achin' fer a chance to hang me?"

Once again Mirdon registered amazement. "Zello, too?" he gasped.

"Who knows?" Seth shrugged. "But we'll be findin' out, Jim, or I'm a fool an' a jackass!"

CHAPTER VIII

WALDO, as previously stated, was ever a place in which there were topics for conversation. But never in its history was there more of gossip, surprised gossip, then when the story of Jim Mirdon's reward to Seth Morgan was made know.

"It's like Mirdon; just the sort o' thing he'd do," one man of the range said.

"The old fool!" Zello snarled. "Jim Mirdon ain't done a thing but hit plumb into his second childhood! That gal o' his'n has had her haid turned by love, that's what! An' Jim believes all she has to say about this hellion Morgan. He's a bad egg, this Morgan. He packs a killin' gun an' throws 'er easy an' straight!"

"Most o' his fightin' was did ag'in' rustlers, I reckon," one inoffensive little man ventured to say.

"Shut up, you!" Zello growled. "I'm the sheriff o' this county an', as sech, I gotta maintain law an' order an' peace. I knows who's bad an' who ain't!"

Silence greeted the remark until one other man mentioned that Seth Morgan already had made his new start out on the Snake River. "He's got fine grazin' land an' good cattle if they come from the Diamond M herds," he allowed. "He oughta do well."

"He's lookin' fer riders. I'm startin' to work out there to-morrow," a tan-faced cowboy stated. "He wants three more men. Startin' small, he is, but if he takes his lessons from Jim Mirdon he'll soon be big, an' he's shore tuh play right square with his help."

Seth himself did not appear in the town following the announcement and the registering of the new brand. Jim Mirdon came in and verified all the talk. He also registered the new brand.

"Morgan'll make good," he predicted. "Everybody's got that young fellah wrong. He's on the level. His brand is the Sunburst an' I'm here tuh register it in his name."

"Queer brand," a listener suggested.

"Queer, yes," Mirdon assented readily, "but the youngster wouldn't have it no other way. Guess he figgers it'll bring him luck. At that, it ain't such an easy one tuh blot out!"

During the week that followed, three more men of the town took jobs with Seth Morgan. To them he made no mention of the plot that had been laid between himself and Jim Mirdon. He put them to work on the range in the usual manner and told them that they could work pretty well together, as he planned not splitting his little herd at all for two or three years to come.

"Jim has agreed to sell me more land as I need it," he explained. "He's goin' tuh help me finance the start an' I reckon I'm sittin' pretty from here on."

This story, in the natural course of events, reached Waldo and secretly became a well discussed topic in certain quiet gatherings in the rear room of the Palace o' Joy. One other saloon keeper of the town was much in evidence at these gatherings. He had a mind and he spoke it freely.

"We can't let that hellion git a foothold," he explained to an eager and uneasy audience. "I can't help it if Jim Mirdon is in on his scheme. We gotta act and we gotta act quick, gents. Yuh can't tell me that this Morgan ain't smart. I knows better. He's got his eyes on us an' he keeps 'em there. Blenken an' Pratt an' Vokel bein' killed looks bad!"

"Mebbe so," another admitted dubiously, "but what the hell's tuh do?"

"Do?" the speaker snarled. "Thar's only one thing tuh be did! We'll turn the boys loose ontuh him ag'in—drive the hellion out—break him. Mirdon'll git sick o' feedin' him cattle jest tuh have him lose 'em!"

"It'll be risky—"

"Risky be damned! We gotta do it, I'm tellin' yuh. We gotta. A quick drop in on the herd, plenty o' stampede an' gunfire, then a run tuh Blenken's gulch an' a blottin' iron. It'll work. It allus has afore!"

So, unknown to, but suspected by Seth Morgan, the old plot was laid afresh, and the gang at Waldo planned their swooping night attack upon the third herd Seth had assembled. It was all done quietly. Had the men known just what Seth himself had been planning with the help of Jim Mirdon, things never would have come out as they did. But the men did not know.

Riding the range immediately at hand to Seth's herd, was a mobile army of tight-lipped cowboys. They gyrated leisurely in a small circle about the wandering herd of the Sunburst Ranch. They watched with the eye of a buzzard for the first manifestation of trouble. During the light of day they rested in the bunkhouse of the Diamond M. Just as soon as night settled over the world they were in the saddle and riding close to the Sunburst herd, their presence there unsuspected even by Seth's hired riders.

So matters rested. Like two impatient armies, the plotters of Waldo schemed their propitious attack, and the defenders of right rode silently through the night, their guns ready, their courage at high pitch, their ambition to blast their way to triumph over evil forces.

Sally, though she was not told of the arrangement and really believed that her uncle had established Seth Morgan in business for a third time, sensed, after a time, that something was stirring under the surface.

She had never quite overcome her hurt at the casual response Seth had made to her glowing tribute paid him in the presence of others at the jail. That feeling was augmented by the fact that, after he started the Sunburst Ranch, he never paid either her uncle or herself a visit.

Once she had ridden out to Snake River and seen his little herd for herself. The sun was high when she arrived and, though there was no house in which Morgan could live, she easily found his camp. She was told rather abruptly by a rider that Morgan was asleep.

"Up most o' the night, he was, ma'am," the cowboy told her. "He's a right ready hombre gittin' the new things a-runnin'."

"I wouldn't for the world disturb him!" Sally exclaimed. "By all means let him sleep."

She rode back to the Diamond M, telling herself that nothing under the sun would keep her from calling on Morgan and assuring herself that, now that she had called, he would promptly come to her. Above all other things, Sally Mirdon had common sense.

She was not the sort to blind herself to her own emotions. It had been made very plain to her, even in the few days she had know Seth Morgan, that he was different to her than any man ever had been. She was by no means sure that she loved him, but she felt that she really did.

This impulse, coming without the elapse of time, amazed her. She tried to convince herself that her feeling was one of gratitude, appreciation. perhaps even pity for the reverses he had suffered. But she knew better. On that ride back home she talked very frankly to herself. Asked herself questions which, in one breath she laughed aside as preposterous, and, in the next, admitted she could not answer.

"If I was sure he loved me," she mused, "I think I would love him. He is so big and strong and—brave—but he doesn't love me. He doesn't even come to see me. Laughs aside the nicest things I say to him—but oh—I hope he does. I want him to love me. I want to love him!"

And Seth Morgan did not call at the Diamond M. A full week went by and Sally knew that something was wrong because her uncle was out a great deal at night, and more and more she could see

in his face and eyes a growing concern; a nervous expectancy that traced itself in shortened temper and nervous, jerky monosyllables as he talked.

Finally the girl went to him. She asked him frankly what the trouble was and knew that he avoided her question. She persisted.

"I cain't tell yuh, gal," he admitted at last. "There is somethin' stirrin'—somethin' mighty deep, too. But I'm bound by promises an' cain't speak till it's over."

"Is it trouble?" she persisted.

"It shore is! Trouble an' a-plenty of it," he grumbled.

"Is Seth in it—is it somethin' about him?"

"I'll say it is! It shore enough is, Sally."

"Is he in — danger?" she asked again, dubiously.

"I—I—Say, I said I couldn't tell yuh, gal! Yuh just gotta sit tight like all the rest o' us till it breaks!"

"Why are you out so much at night, Uncle Jim?" she asked then. "Aunt Mame says you never were before."

He shook his head impatiently. "Now look here," he complained frankly, "it ain't no fun fer me tuh have tuh keep things from you an' Mame. I'm catchin' blazes from my nerves as 'tis. Don't make it heaps harder by askin' all these questions, child. You'll know all there is tuh know arter it happens—an' not afore."

The girl raised her chin and sniffed scornfully. "You can't keep it from me," she said firmly. "I'll find out just as sure as the sun shines—and I think you're mean, too, Uncle Jim!"

She turned and walked away. Jim Mirdon stood silent, with a stricken look upon his face. It went terribly against his wishes to have the girl speak thus to him.

Suddenly she whirled, about and ran to his arms. He felt her lovely lips against his cheek and heard her tell him that she was sorry for what she had said. Delighted, he told her no harm had been done.

"But," she told him again at parting, "I'll find out, Uncle Jim!"

"Danged," Mirdon muttered to himself as he stood alone, "if I don't think the little minx'll do it, too!"

CHAPTER IX

EMOTION does not permit reason. Deep in the heart of Sally Mirdon she knew that she loved Seth Morgan; knew that nothing mattered above her love for the man. Where he was concerned, no thought of personal danger entered her mind. She thought only of him.

It followed that, in her acute feminine manner, she decided that hers was the greatest right of all to know the threatening secrets that surrounded Morgan. His life was in danger, she believed. His life. Surely, she told herself, his life was hers! For she had made up her mind to see in those gray eyes of his a lovelight for herself. She had determined to have him love her. That being the case, their lives were identical. What she did for his life was, as well, for her very own!

During the heat of that afternoon after her talk with Mirdon, she rested. She slept some, but mostly she lay on her bed planning what course she would follow. There seemed but one. That it was fraught with peril did not in the least sway her in her decision to pursue it.

If Mirdon rode out nights, there was a reason for it. Perhaps if she followed him and discovered what he did, she would know something of what was happening about her. She decided to follow him that very night. There was a new tension about the Diamond M that anyone could sense.

None spoke of that which was in his mind, and that very fact spoke volumes. The men about the place had become suddenly tight-lipped and suggestively quiet. The banter that was customary in the conversations had disappeared. They loafed about days, but along toward sunset they waked and showed an alert and expectant attitude.

When, that night, Sally crept out into the open and saddled the horse which Mirdon had given to her for her own use, she realized for the first time the silence

that had come over the ranch. The bunkhouse was like a tomb. There were fewer men to be seen about than usually was the case.

She picketed her pony in readiness to follow her uncle. If she thought at all about the matter, it occurred to her that she would be safe so long as Mirdon was near at hand, and her purpose was to keep him near at hand.

Because the rancher was deeply preoccupied when he left the house for his nightly journey, she had no trouble in trailing him. He threw a saddle on his horse and quite deliberately struck out at a canter in the direction of Snake River. She followed, keeping just close enough for the sound of hoofs to remain audible to her ears.

The moon rose and lit up the plains with its sepulchral light. Far ahead, she could dimly see her uncle's figure. He rode until the river showed ahead, its brackish waters garbed in a fictitious beauty as the white light lent glamour to its surface. There he was hailed by a man whose voice was vaguely familiar to the girl.

She trailed him until he disappeared in a clump of trees. She rode as close to these as she dared, then dropped her reins over the pony's head and crept close afoot. There were voices to be heard and the tromping of horse's hoofs as they stood about near at hand. Someone in the trees was smoking and the odor of the tobacco dirfted to the girl's nostrils.

A voice spoke out audibly and she listened:

"They ain't makin' a move very fast," the voice said. "There ain't a thing new, Jim."

"They'll come," another voice said. It was a voice that thrilled her, the voice of Seth Morgan. "Onless I'm a double-dyed burro louse with the blind staggers, them hellions'll be showin' right soon!"

"I reckon," Mirdon's voice sounded. "Somehow, I git the same feelin' about that as Seth does. I reckon they'll be a-comin'. We'll wait around till crack o' dawn, anyhow."

The girl waited for more conversation, but there was little; virtually none of that had to do with what she most wanted to hear. Each of the men among the trees seemed so thoroughly to understand what was expected that words would have been a waste of effort. She learned nothing.

Now and then, through the long vigil that followed, matches would strike and fresh tobacco clouds drift among the trees like stealthy creatures of the night. Voices attesting impatience would bark out oaths and hopes that something soon would come up to break the monotony of waiting. Once the girl was certain that she heard the ominous clicking of a revolver as its owner broke the weapon and twirled the cylinder in his fingers.

Never, it seemed to Sally, then, had anything thrilled her as did a low hum that came through the silent night from a great distance. She caught the sound before the men among the trees. She listened and decided that it was the thunder of hoofs against the dust of the plains. Here, perhaps, was that strange thing for which all these men waited.

Presently there was a stir among the trees. Seth Morgan's voice sounded. "Somebody's a-comin' hell-bent, gents," he snapped. "Git goin'—it might be—".

The hoofs were coming nearer at a terrific speed. Whoever was riding through the night was exacting every ounce of speed his mount could summon. And he was riding, too, directly toward the clump of cottonwoods.

"It's Wells, shore as yo're born!" her uncle cried softly. "Jest the way the lad's a-comin' shows there's somethin' poppin'."

"Better hit leather, gents," Seth Morgan said laconically, "I figger this is the thing we been waitin' fer!"

The girl herself followed those orders. She went to her pony and leaped into the saddle. Then she brought the animal close that she might trail the riders when they set out from the rendezvous among the trees. The thunder of the hoofs was close when the troupe of men rode from the sheltering shadows under the cottonwoods and stood by.

Wells, Sally knew, was a regular and trusted rider at the Diamond M. It was

clear to the girl that he had been posted as a messenger at some distant point and that he was now riding with all speed to deliver some vital news.

She was near at hand when he came to a sliding stop before the waiting men. His message was crisp, terse, served almost electrically to inspire the riders.

"It's to-night!" he snapped. "I damn near missed it at the very last minute. They're a'ready on their way, boys. About ten o' them an' heeled fer trouble, too. They'll drop down on the herd near the big bend in the river an' they'll stampede 'em fer Blenken's gulch—git goin'!"

"One second!" Seth cried as the men started in a concerted rush for the big bend. "Mirdon, I'd like fer you to leave this job to us. Yuh done enough a'ready!"

"Go to the devil!" Jim Mirdon shouted. "I'm willin' tuh take my orders from you, Seth—but I ain't hikin' out now!"

Morgan tried hard to argue, but the men were impatient. "The big bend o' the river, lads," Jim Mirdon shouted gleefully. "Damned if Seth didn't call the turn an' I'll be plumb int'rested tuh see jest what fish we catch. Take yore orders from Seth an' play hell with 'em plenty!"

The cavalcade was off with a rush. Sally did not know where the big bend was, but she put her pony into a match of speed with the men ahead and found no trouble in keeping at their heels. Terror gripped at her throat and clutched at her heart with icy fingers. She knew that she had slipped back again where life was raw, and death casual. These men were going to fight. There was battle to the death in their voices, their words, the very drum of the hoofs under them.

And Seth was going into this battle at the head of the line. She knew him; had seen his blind courage and his fearless challenges to fate as he fought for her against the bandits. She rode like mad; felt as though her presence might be a protection to him she so unquestioningly loved.

The night air whipped about her, threw her hair into a glorious turmoil and pressed her clothing about her so that the lines of her body showed tense and rigid. They fairly flew along the river bank; the girl scarcely able to breathe, but fighting with all her courage and strength to keep pace.

The moonlight showed the big bend in the river. Even as she saw the place, she felt her heart leap at the sound of a shot ahead. It was followed instantly by other shots, the frightened bellows of steers, and the low rumble of many hoofs as the animals stirred, milled uncertainly, then took refuge in flight.

The rumble of the hoofs rose in crescendo. The herd, small though it was, was in flight. Wildly, with great horns tossing and eyes distended in unreasoning terror, the animals thundered after their leaders. Dust rose in mighty stifling clouds to cake about their nostrils and eyelids and madden them the more. Shouts and screams encouraged the terror of the beasts. Men rode behind and beside them, bellowing in raucous voices and shooting their pistols into the air to lend additional terror to the flight of the herd.

Sally saw all this, then was enveloped in the whirling clouds of dust as the men she followed veered their course to follow the herd and strike back at the rustlers who were making their third attempt to drive into poverty the man she loved.

After that it was pretty much a turmoil to the girl. She had to fight with all her skill to keep her place in the saddle under her. Her pony seemed a victim of the same fervent idiocy which had affected the steers. He lunged madly ahead, caring not in which direction, heedless of the course he chose, blind to prairie-dog holes and the swishing grass that might knot about his hoofs and hurl himself and his rider into a mangled heap on the plains.

The girl knew that she was lost. There was not the strength in her arms to handle the pony she rode. It had become stampeded by the whirl of excitement, the shouting, the thunder of hoofs, and the continuous barking of revolvers. It was blinded and strangled by the billowing dust in the wake of the herd, yet she could not veer it out into the open.

Now and then she caught fleeting glances of riders about her, but never could she draw near them. A sense of

terror gripped her. She did not know where she was going, knew only that she was fighting with all her vanishing strength to cling to the mad animal she rode.

Twice, when riders appeared like ghosts near her, she cried out for help, but neither time did she make herself heard, nor, if she did, make an impression upon the men. Once she saw a flash of fire close at hand and heard the roar of a gun.

She shut her eyes, clenched her teeth, plunged on because there was not another thing she could do. Before her eyes appeared a flash of Seth Morgan's face. She knew that she did not see it there, knew this was hallucination, yet it seemed real. Her pony responded to another nearby shot by going into a series of mad bucks and lunges.

The girl's head whirled madly, her arms snapped about like blankets in a gale, she felt the saddle slipping away from her, realized that she was losing and must be hurled wildly into the dust underfoot and perhaps be trampled upon by other riders or stray steers.

She opened her eyes and shook away the dizziness which threatened to engulf her. Just ahead of her, and riding at such an angle that they seemed certain to crash into her, came two riders. She screamed to them. This time they answered, but the answer lent terror additional. One of them twisted in his saddle and fired at her. She saw the flash of the gun, heard the report, and sensed the whizz of the bullet as it flashed past her to speed on in quest of a chance target in the night.

Then a very terrifying thing overtook her. It was another rider. She felt the hot breath of his animal on her leg as he drew close. He answered the shot and her own pony veered in terror. She slipped sidewise, released the reins, and fought to get back into the saddle.

At her side, the man fired again. Then she felt his arm about her and she lost all sense of things as he lifted her bodily from her horse and draped her across the pommel of his own saddle. It was a superb piece of horsemanship and undoubtedly it saved her life. She knew it as it happened, then she collapsed, her arms touching the flying legs of a horse on one side, her feet banging against flying legs on the other.

Three times, four, the rider who had saved her fired. Each time the roar of the shots roused her from a mounting coma. The last time she opened her eyes. She was looking at the side of a saddle and at the knee of a man. On the saddle she saw silver markings.

A glad cry escaped her lips: "Seth! Oh, Seth! Thank God!"

Her answer came in the form of two more shots from her rescuer. Then she felt the pony veer outward, and shortly the dust was not so thick and Seth Morgan had brought his horse to a stop and was lifting her to the ground.

"You fool," he said vehemently, "you damned, lovable, little fool!"

She found no resentment in her heart. All the world was right to Sally just so long as Morgan's voice was soft and tender and frightened when he spoke thus to her.

"I had to come along, Seth," she pleaded, her voice shaken and her lips trembling. "I had to—I—Seth—I love you. I couldn't stand it—I love you so—"

The dust settled softly about them and the herd vanished in the distance as they stood there. He held her still; held her close to him, and his great arms applied a pressure that thrilled the girl and stifled her in an embrace of understanding.

"I ain't a hellion," he said. "Sally, I ain't! I fought 'em off 'cause they're rotten an' crooked, an' this was the way I took to prove it to yore uncle an' everybody else. I love you, too. I'm sorry—I snored under that hat. I'm sorry I drank—Gawd, how I love yuh, gal!"

CHAPTER X

THE town of Waldo soon learned the truth of Seth Morgan and his previous gunfighting record. They learned other things that are still related in the calm little metropolis through which train after train of cattle passes out to the vast markets of the East.

For one thing, they learned how, while he rode at the head of a band of rustlers, Biff Zello had paid for his humiliation of Sally Mirdon that day when he brought her, with Morgan, into the town jail.

For Zello was the head of the bandit and rustling gang, and his particular grudge against Seth Morgan was that he suspected Morgan of having traced the operations down to himself. That was why he sought quick rope punishment for the young rider.

They learned, also, that the Sunburst brand was entirely a fake. They knew that the two hundred head of cattle were returned to Jim Mirdon as soon as their purpose had been served, and that Morgan was once more a free lance of the plains.

Later they found out that Sally Mirdon would be Sally Mirdon but a little while longer. Great was the excitement and the glad welcome given the news that Sally and Seth were to marry.

"And I am Sally of the sage!" the girl told those who came to felicitate her. "I'll never be anything else. This is my country and my man is as much a part of it as the sage itself!"

Nothing the girl could have said would so quickly have ingratiated her in the hearts of the people of the plains. Seth Morgan himself beamed with delight and pride.

In the course of time, he sat again in the huge office of Jim Mirdon and his eyes dimmed with tears at what the older man said to him. He was given his choice of two propositions. The first was to assume the duties of foreman of the Diamond M with the understanding that Sally and himself would inherit the place when Mirdon had passed on. The second was to take the Snake River land and the two hundred head of cattle and really start again.

When he explained that he could not accept charity, Mirdon agreed that he would accept a series of notes that could be paid off from earnings.

Sally it was who settled things. She came into the office and promptly put matters straight.

"You be the foreman here, Seth," she urged. "We'll be married right away, and you can be a big help to Uncle Jim. I just can't leave him and Aunt Mame, and we'll be happier here, anyway. Just do that, boy dear. Do it for me."

"Done!" Seth agreed. "I shore am sittin' pretty—!"

"And one thing more you can do for me," the girl said. "You can tell me why it was that you named that temporary ranch the Sunburst?"

"Shore thing!" Seth grinned confusedly. "I reckon Jim'll git a laugh at this, but—"

He fished inside his shirt, fumbled there for a moment, then drew forth the brooch with which the girl had pinned his bandages that night on the plains at the waterhole.

"Yuh fergot tuh git this back, Sally," he grinned. "I jest been a-keepin' it. It's a—sunburst."

Sally Mirdon burst into a happy laugh. "I just knew it!" she cried. "It just had to be that way, because, you know, you never really proposed to me. I told you I loved you and maybe you just agreed to please me—".

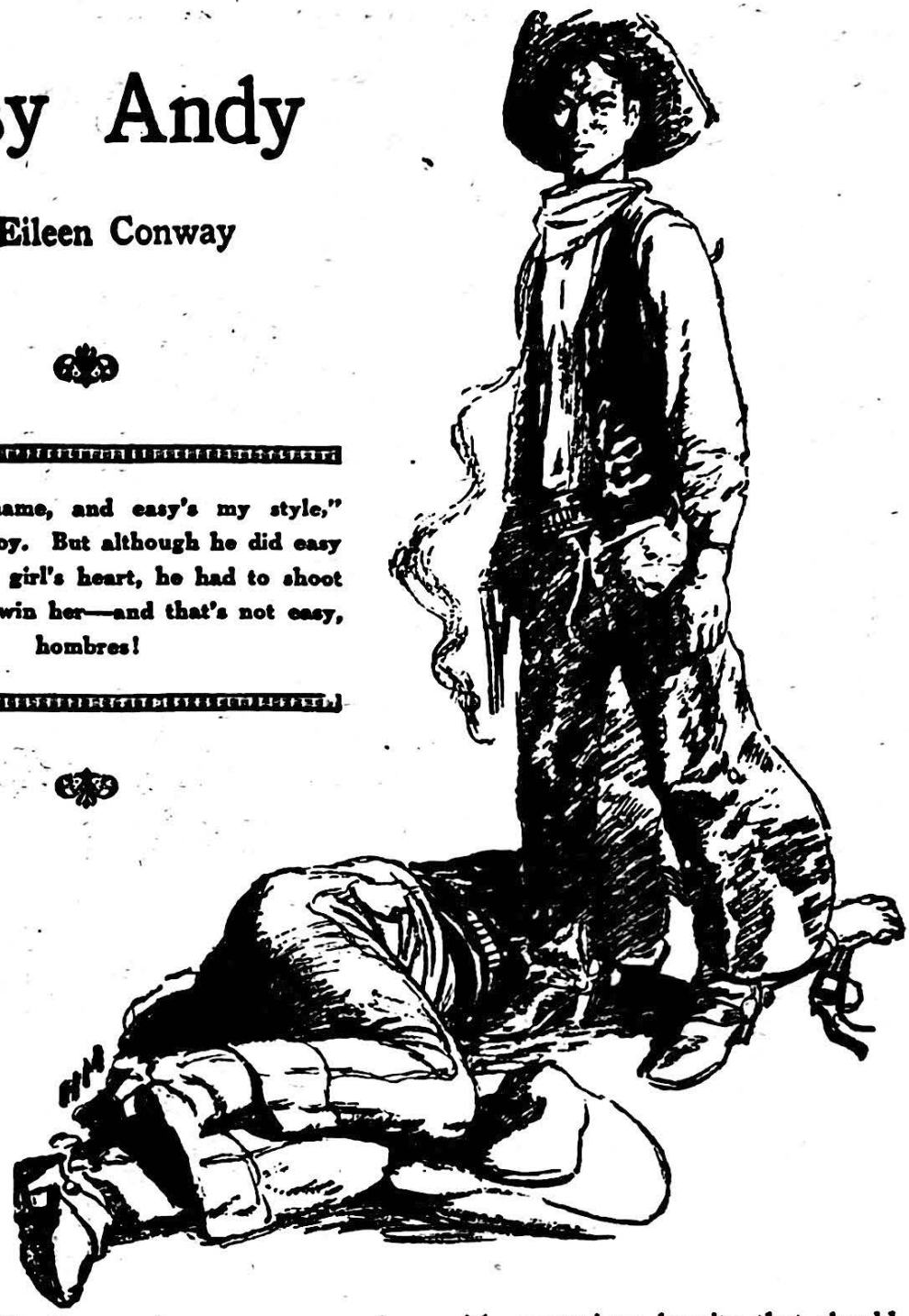
"I reckon not," he protested.

"I know it, now! Knew it when you named that brand. That was what gave me the courage to tell you out there on the plains that I loved you."

"I'm plumb pleased," he told her, catching her hand and drawing her to him. "Saved me a heap o' confusion, Sally. I reckon I'm kinda sittin' pretty—!"

Easy Andy

By Eileen Conway



"Easy's my name, and easy's my style," said this cowboy. But although he did easy himself into a girl's heart, he had to shoot three men to win her—and that's not easy, hombres!

WHEN the cowboy messenger from the Half Circle M ranch rode up to the line-camp in Rattlesnake Pasture, he told "Easy Andy" McHale, the line-rider:

"Old man wants tuh see yuh, Easy. Told me tuh stay here an' take yuhr place at the camp. Yuh better rattle yuhr hocks fer headquarters, an' prepare tuh pack yuhr war-bag an' kiss yuhr job good-by."

"So the Old Man's r'arin' again, is he?" Easy grinned. "I figger I know why."

"Maybeso," answered the other cowboy, with mysterious brevity that should have been a warning.

But Easy Andy McHale was not alarmed. His twinkling gray eyes, the careless yet alert poise of his lean body, bespoke a happy-go-lucky disposition from which his friends had evolved a fitting nickname—"Easy."

The spirit of the glamorous old-time West lived in Easy Andy, a modern cowboy. A year before, he had owned a small outfit of his own, located thirty-odd miles from the Half Circle M headquarters. Drouth and low stock-prices had compelled

him to give up his herd. But he had accepted without complaint this reverse of circumstances, and had gone to work for the Half Circle M. Easy was not one to "cry over spilt milk." Besides, he found life particularly pleasant at the Half Circle M. For he had fallen in love with Mary Bannister, the daughter of the ranch owner.

"So the Old Man's getting ready to fire me again," Easy chuckled to himself as he rode away from the line-camp. "I'll have to talk him out of it."

It was not the first time Old Man Bannister had threatened to remove him from the Half Circle M payroll.

Easy galloped up to the ranch headquarters. Uttering a wolf-keyed yell, he waved his dented gray Stetson in eager greeting to Mary Bannister.

"Doggone, it's shore good to see yuh again, Mary!" he shouted, and swung down at the bars of the horse corral, where Mary was feeding sugar lumps to a blaze-faced, long-legged sorrel horse that stood within.

"It's been exactly two weeks and one day since you came in from camp last time, Mr. Easy Andy McHale," returned the girl, coolly. "But I've heard considerable about you in those two weeks. It seems like you've gone and got yourself into a peck of trouble."

She shook her head decidedly, and her bronze-colored hair glinted in the sunlight.

"Now what have I gone and done?" inquired the cowboy, innocently.

She frowned. "I'm afraid this is one time you won't be able to talk Dad out of firing you, Easy. He's been rampaging all over the house for the last twenty-four hours. Easy," she demanded, flushing, "why don't you quit your bad habits?"

"Bad habits? Well, I reckon maybe I have got some," Easy admitted.

"You sure have! Your crazy tricks will get you into trouble yet. Dad says he won't put up with your tomfoolery any longer. He hired you to ride line, not to make night trips to Buckman and play poker and get into shooting scrapes with the Buckman marshal."

"I figgered that was what yore dad was on the prod about," Easy said. "I'll talk to him."

"Well, you'll have to do some right-smart fancy talking," warned Mary Bannister. "There's been some cattle-stealing going on around the ranch, and it's sure got him in a bad humor."

She fed another sugar lump to the long-legged sorrel. Easy reached forward to stroke the sorrel's soft muzzle. The horse was his own individual mount, "Blazes" by name. Easy had left him at headquarters and had been riding Half Circle M horses while on duty at the line-camp. But now Blazes refused to acknowledge his master. His ears went back. He shook his head and dodged away from Easy's petting hand.

"Well, I be doggoned!" ejaculated the cowboy. "My own horse won't have anything to do with me. You've stole him from me, Mary. Yessir. You've made a sugar-eater, a reg'lar pet horse, out o' him."

"Sure. Blazes and I are pardners," laughed the girl, but her blue eyes followed Easy anxiously as he strode up to the main house to interview Old Man Bannister.

Bannister was the tallest man on Paloduro range—tall and gnarled and sinewy, with piercing gray eyes.

"Yuh're fired, McHale!" he bawled, as Easy climbed the porch steps at the rambling main-house. "I got yore time figgered an yore check already made out."

Easy leaned against the railing and without haste proceeded to roll a brown cigarette. He rather enjoyed these wrangles with the boss. Always before they had begun by Bannister firing him and ended by the ranchman hiring him over again.

"I talked to Mary," he nodded. "She said yuh objected some to the night trips I been makin' to Buckman."

"Yuh're doggone right I object," snorted the boss. "I hired yuh to ride line——"

"An' yuh'll find I've done a good job a-ridin' that line," nodded Easy pleasantly.

"Maybeso. Dang it all, McHale, I

didn't have no objections to yuh goin' in to town occasional. It's them durn foolish tricks o' yourn that I object to. I've heard all about how yuh tried to shoot things up at Buckman t'other night. Hank Whipple, the marshal, chased yuh out, didn't he, coupla nights ago? An' warned yuh he'd put yuh in jail next time yuh show up, didn't he?"

Easy laughed. "There's no hard feelin's between me an' Hank. We jest staged a good-natured shootin'-match, at the stars. I let him chase me through town. It's a heap o' fun to see a fat ol' hombre like Hank try to run."

"Yuh're too free an' easy," said Bannister, grimly. "But yuh might jest as well hobble yore lip. This is one time yuh can't talk me into hirin' yuh back. There's cattle-stealin' bein' done on this range at present, an' I want dependable men on my payroll—men that I kin trust."

"Meanin' jest what?" And Easy took a sharp step forward.

"Yuh got too many bad habits," answered the lanky old cowman. "Yuh're allus raisin' hell o' some kind—playin' jokes on fellers, an' pryin' the lid off'n things at Buckman, an' shootin' up ammunition jest fer the sake o' hearin' yore smoke-wagon go off. I got a distrust fer wild young hombres with bad habits like yores."

"Meanin' jest what?" Easy repeated the question.

Old Man Bannister was blunt. "I mean jest this," he roared. "Yuh was seen settin' in a friendly game o' stud at Buckman with a gent named Terrel last week. When one o' my cowhands gets thick with that Terrel feller, it's time fer him to be removed from my hire. Us ranchmen's got it figgered Terrel's back o' the cattle-stealin' that's bein' done in this country."

"Meanin' that yuh think I'm a cow-thief, workin' with this Terrel feller?" inquired Easy Andy, his tone dangerously calm.

"I don't trust no man with as many bad habits as yuh got," exploded Bannister. "Yuh still own that cattle range over north where yuh went busted, don't yuh?"

"Shore. Why?"

Bannister waved his long arms, and spat over the railing.

"Aw, hell," he growled. "I ain't got no proof ag'in' yuh, McHale. Jest the same, I don't want yuh workin' fer me no more. I've fired yuh. Saddle up yore sorrel, an' hit the trail."

Easy Andy had gone white about the mouth.

"Yuh long-legged, lop-eared ol' gander!" he said evenly. "If yuh wasn't my Mary's father, I'd shore make yuh eat back every word that's dripped from yore jaws. Maybe there'll come a time when the boss o' the Half Circle M will be glad to step up an' shake hands with a cowhand he called a thief. I'm a-ridin'."

He gathered up his belongings from the bunkhouse, packed them in his war-bag, stripped his saddle from the horse he had ridden in from the line-camp, and then strode down to the corral. Mary Bannister still stood at the corral bars, as though awaiting him.

"Easy," she began, "I guess you didn't talk Dad out of firing you this time."

Easy shook his head.

"You don't act like yourself, Easy," she said suddenly, tilting her bronzed little head, the better to look at him. "I'm sorry you've lost your job. I guess it was just on account of your bad habits. And after all, Easy," she added impulsively, "there's nothing bad or mean about 'em."

"Bad habits!" muttered Easy, and he laughed bitterly.

It was plain that Mary didn't know the seriousness of her father's accusations against him. Mechanically, he cinched his saddle on Blazes.

"Good-by, Mary," he said, holding out his hand.

"Why, Easy," she laughed, "you sure are taking this hard—for you! Surely you won't pack a grudge against *all* us Half Circle M folks, just because Dad fired you."

"No," said Easy, huskily. "I've got no grudge against *you*, Mary dear. And I'm comin' back to the Half Circle M one o' these days—yessir, I'm comin' back."

He swung into the saddle, and plunged away. Blazes snorted rebelliously and

whirled his head, whinnying back at the watching girl.

"Ol' sugar-eater," Easy Andy murmured. "We ain't exactly honin' to leave Mary Bannister, are we?"

At the corral, Mary was thinking: "Dad and Easy must have had quite a racket." And that evening, when her father told her what he hadn't told her before—his suspicions that Easy was a cow-thief—she stamped her foot angrily.

"Easy a cow-thief?" she cried. "No such thing!"

"How come yuh to be takin' up fer the wild young jigger?" exploded Bannister. "If I ketch yuh tryin' to have anything to do with him, I'll shore corral yuh in the house till yuh come to yore senses, by gatlins! I never did put no trust in free an' easy, trick-playin' fellers like McHale. They allus come to a bad end. I told yuh, didn't I, Mary, that forty-odd head o' my steers was stolen from my north pasture, coupla nights ago? Sandstorm put out their trail."

"But Easy wasn't riding line on that part of the range," flamed Mary.

"No—but no tellin' where all he's been o' nights. Terrel's back o' this cattle-stealin'. McHale's been seen settin' in a friendly poker game with Terrel, an' Terrel's been seen hangin' out 'mongst them hills an' box canyons where McHale used to ranch. I figger he's been usin' the ol' McHale place as rustlin' headquarters. If this don't all p'int to McHale an' Terrel teamin' up together, I hope a hydrophoby skunk bites me plumb to death!"

The loss of forty head of steer had put Old Man Bannister in a bad humor. Already he had sent his cowboys riding north, up the Diablo Mountain Range, hoping they would pick up the trail of the stolen stock. He was acting under the assumption that the thieves would attempt a hurried drive to take the cows out of the country.

Bannister had no direct proof that the man Terrel was leading the recent rustling operations. Terrel, a stocky, dark-featured man, had appeared on Paloduro range about three months before. Two cronies accompanied him. Cattle thefts had begun almost immediately after the coming of the trio. The Paloduro cattlemen had regarded this fact as more than a coincidence, but they had been unable to catch Terrel and his cronies "with the goods."

"I'd jest like to meet that Terrel hombre again an' camp on his trail for a while," thought a pale young cowpuncher, as he rode into Buckman, that evening.

This cowpuncher's name was McHale, but just now the nickname, "Easy Andy," would have been a misfit. His gray eyes were like steel; his lean jaws were clamped; the free and easy poise had departed. The injustice of Old Man Banister's accusation rankled him.

"I reckon he'll be a-tellin' Mary that I'm a cow-thief," he muttered. "I don't care so much what the Ol' Man thinks—but Mary, she's a little queen. I wouldn't be running around wild if she'd be my wife-girl."

He hitched his horse and wandered up the board-walk which was striped by the lights of Buckman. A cowboy hailed him.

"Sufferin' snakes, this ain't Easy Andy McHale, is it? Whose funeral yuh celebratin'? Say, Hank Whipple will shore run yuh out o' town if he sights yuh."

Easy clanked on. Down at the shipping pens at the other end of town, an engine was snorting and puffing. The bawl of cattle came on the night air.

"Yessir," Easy was thinking. "Mebby I have got too many bad habits, after all. 'Tain't my nature to be pious, but dang it, I reckon Ol' Bannister wouldn't have been so quick in his suspicions against me if it wasn't account o' what he calls my bad habits. Yessir, I'm shore goin' to tame down an' reform."

His plans for reformation lasted only as long as it took to make them.

"Durn yuh, Easy McHale!" bawled a familiar voice. "I done told yuh never tuh show yuh face in this yere town ag'in. Git, durn yuh."

It was Hank Whipple, the Buckman marshal. He came charging down the street—a fat, comical figure. His right hand flourished a six-shooter toward the stars. Bang! Bang! The shots were his

warning for Easy to vacate the town.

A reckless grin blazed across the cowboy's face. He was "Easy Andy" again now. He couldn't resist the temptations of another frolic with the fat marshal.

"Whoopy-yeee!" he yelled. "Come on, Hank! If yuh don't want me in this here dilapidated cow-town, yuh'll have to run me out."

Pulling his gun, he sent two shots into the sky.

"Stop that shootin', blast yuh!" puffed Hank. "Yuh're under arrest."

"Come an' get me, yuh spavined ol' bullfrog!"

Easy raced down the board-walk, with Hank in pursuit. The two were friends. Neither took the other's taunts and threats seriously. Hank felt that his official position compelled him to make some pretense at keeping wild young buckaroos like Easy under control. And Easy enjoyed being chased, for he liked to see Hank run.

Their steps roared like thunder down the loose clapboard walk. Easy let himself out in jackrabbit strides, and was soon at the other end of the town. He ducked behind a ragged tamarisk hedge.

Immediately below rose the skeleton-like outlines of the shipping pens. A train was pulled up alongside. A brakeman signalled with his lantern, and the engineer answered with toots of the whistle. All these things Easy glimpsed out of the tail of his eye.

"Stop, durn yuh! Stop!" bawled Hank Whipple, racing past without seeing the hidden cowboy. He blazed another shot into the sky, and plunged toward the train, which had begun to move.

"He thinks I'm hidin' down by the pens," chuckled Easy, and he struck out to the left. Hearing another shot, he chuckled again. Passing around some Mexican adobes near the railroad tracks, he came to an abrupt stop.

The train was moving out of town. Ahead, three riders came dashing across the tracks. The headlights of the engine sprayed upon them. Easy recognized the foremost rider — a stocky dark-featured man.

"Terrel!" he ejaculated. "The hombre folks has kinda been suspicionin' o' bein' a rustler. Yessir, the same gent that Old Man Bannister figgers I've been too thick with—jest because I set in a game o' poker with him here in Buckman. Seems in a powerful hurry, Terrel and his pardners does."

The riders had headed away from town, toward the north.

Ten minutes later, as Easy came sauntering back along the board-walk, expecting Hank Whipple to discover him and resume the chase, a girl came darting up behind him.

"Easy!" she cried huskily. "Why did you do it?"

Easy peered at her in the semi-darkness. "Oh, I reckon I savvy what yuh mean, Mary," he said suddenly, in a glum tone. "Yore dad's been a-tellin' yuh—that I'm a ornery, low-down cow-thief. Doggone—I'd hoped yuh wouldn't believe it, Mary."

"No! That's not what I mean, Easy, though I did want to talk to you about that. I headed for Buckman, soon as Dad told me. I thought you'd probably come here."

"You believe I'm a cow-thief?"

"No, I don't!" she whispered vehemently. "I know there's a mistake some where. Come Easy. Get your horse. We'll talk things over when we're out of town a ways. Hurry, Easy."

A mile out of town, they pulled up their horses. Mary told Easy all that her father had confided to her.

"I savvy better, now," Easy said, grimly. "Yore dad didn't want to come out plumb open in talkin' to me, being's he had no proof. This is the first I've heard about them forty head o' Half Circle M steers bein' stolen. And yore dad figgers Terrel's usin' my ranch for rustlin' headquarters, does he? It's news to me."

Mary Bannister's eyes gleamed into his. "Easy," she burst out desperately, "you must leave the country right away."

"Sufferin' cats!" he exploded. "I'm no cow-thief."

"No—but Hank Whipple may die. Why did you shoot old Hank, Easy?"

Easy gasped: "What's this about Hank?"

"He says you shot him. I got into town just in time to see him chase you down the street. Somebody shot him when he was running down towards the railroad. He thought it was you."

"Old Hank shot?" Easy groaned. "Shore, I heard a shot after he'd run past me. But I thought it was Hank hisself doin' the shootin'. Why, Mary, old Hank's my friend. I didn't shoot him."

"He thinks you did. If he dies, circumstantial evidence will be strong against you, and they'll want to hold you for murder. Easy, won't you go?" she begged.

"Yes," Easy said, suddenly. "I'll go, Mary."

But he didn't tell her that he meant to go—back to Buckman. He reined in close, captured the girl's slim hands in his, and said huskily: "I love you, Mary. And some day I'm a-comin' back to the Half Circle M to tell you all about it—yessir, I'm comin' back, Mary!"

Half an hour later, Easy pushed open the door of the Buckman railroad station and strode into the ticket office. Here on a small cot lay Hank Whipple, groaning from his wound. He was surrounded by a group of friends, who shot up hostile glances as Easy entered the room.

"Lookin' for me, gents?" inquired Easy.

Receiving no answer, he brushed them aside and knelt beside the wounded marshal.

"Doggone yuh, Easy," Hank groaned. "This is a hell of a way to treat an ol' pardner! I never expected yuh'd take a joke serious, an' pot-shot me in the dark the way yuh done."

"I never done it, Hank," said Easy. "Are yuh hit bad?"

"He'll pull through, I reckon," someone answered, gruffly.

"Where'd that shot come from, Hank?" Easy asked.

"From the pens. I thought yuh was hidin' down there. I yelled 'Stop!' an' shot in the air. Jest then, a bullet flattened my wishbone."

"Let's see," Easy said, slowly, "there was a freight pullin' out 'bout that same time, wasn't there? Somebody been loadin' cattle here, had they?"

The station agent answered. "Yeh. Feller named Beasley pulled in with a small herd o' steers just after dark. Him and two fellers with him loaded 'em out, and had me telegraph to have Number Seven pick 'em up to-night. Two carloads, they was. That was Number Seven that just pulled out an hour ago."

"Beasley!" Easy shot out. "He's one o' that Terrel gent's pardners. I'll bet four hundred dollars and a new pair o' pants that this stock they shipped out tonight was stolen stuff. Like as not Terrel and his two pardners was down at the pens when yuh headed that way, Hank. They prob'ly heard yuh yell 'Stop!' and thought yuh was yellin' at them! They thought yuh was tryin' to stop 'em from shippin' out stolen cattle. They plugged yuh quick and immediate to get yuh out o' the way, and then hit the breeze. I seen 'em cut across the tracks jest ahead o' that train."

He whirled, and swept the men with a quick glance.

"By golly, Easy may be right about it," the marshal panted.

The men stepped aside and allowed Easy a passage to the door.

"Adios, gents. I'm a-travelin'."

Easy Andy spent most of the night traveling. He traveled north. At daybreak, crouched behind a spreading juniper, he peered down upon a small adobe house that nestled among a sheltering fold in the hills.

Easy had built the house with his own hands. Only a year before, he had lived here, fighting the drouth in an unsuccessful effort to save his little herd. The corrals, the sheds, the little 'dobe house, the sloping hills, the blue-misted Diabolo Mountains rising beyond—all these were familiar to Easy.

He nodded his head as he noticed a plume of smoke rising from the chimney.

"And three horses in my corral!" he said to himself. "Old Man Bannister was right about one thing. Terrel is usin' my old ranch as rustlin' headquarters. I reckon it's up to me to prove to the Old Man that the only time I ever as much as passed a word of conversation with Terrel

was the time I sat in that poker game with him. But I'm hopin' to get a heap better acquainted with Terrel afore this day's over."

An hour later, Easy saw Terrel and his two cronies appear from the ranch house. They hurried to the corral, cinched saddles on their mounts and rode away southeast, toward the Half Circle M range.

"By golly, they're up to more tricks," decided Easy, following. "Let's see: there's an old spring-wagon in that shed o' mine. And I left a double set o' harness in the back room o' the house when I moved away. Blazes, doggone yuh, I've had yuh hitched double." He slapped his thigh. "I believe I could do it—when I need to!"

He trailed the hard-riding trio. At noon, when they returned to the hills near his ranch, hurriedly driving a bunch of fifty Half Circle M Herefords, Easy Andy was just behind. But he had utilized every available bit of cover so skilfully—arroyos, hillocks, cedar patches—that Terrel and his men had not detected his presence.

Easy smiled. The care-free poise of old had returned to him. He scented victory; dreamed of Mary Bannister's shining eyes.

But he marveled at the sheer daring of the Terrel trio. Here was proof a-plenty of their rustling activities. A crafty gent, this Terrel. His first raid on the Half Circle M had been made during a heavy sandstorm that had put out the trail. He had outguessed Bannister. Reasoning that the latter would send the Half Circle M cowboys down the Diablo range in an effort to pick up the trail, Terrel had executed a daring coup. Instead of attempting a rapid drive overland to rush the cattle out of the country, he had taken them in to Buckman and shipped them.

And now — thus Easy Andy McHale reasoned—Terrel was attempting a second raid of a like nature, while the Half Circle M riders were still absent on their wild-goose chase.

Scouting from the rear, Easy saw the Terrel trio push the cows up toward a box canyon in the Diablos.

"They'll hold 'em there till dark and then make a night drive to the pens," he figured. "And shucks! I know doggone well I can't get my wagon up to the end o' that canyon. I'll need that wagon, shore. These rustler varmints ain't gonna act tame till a shootin' jamboree teaches 'em."

He struck out through the hills and entered the Diablos at a point north of the box canyon. Urging Blazes up a familiar bridle-trail, and screened by a boulder of the mountain, he headed down the slope into the box canyon and stationed himself behind a granite boulder.

The Half Circle M cows were just now entering the canyon's mouth. Easy's circle to head them off had been roundabout but swift. Terrel and his cronies jogged along at the rear of the herd, allowing the cattle to choose their own pace, for the walls of rock hemmed them in on three sides.

"Hands up!"

Easy Andy McHale popped suddenly from behind the granite boulder. The cattle had passed by him. His six-shooter covered the riding trio. His command rang out like the exultant call of a cavalry bugle.

The rustlers recoiled in their saddles. The surprise was complete. But Terrel and his men, hardened to the rustling game and its dangers, were not the sort to submit tamely to the threat of a single gun. Desperately they snatched their only chance—a long chance, but worth trying.

They went for their guns, with swift, snapping movements such as a wolf makes when it closes in on its kill.

Bang! Easy's gun flamed under the blue mountain sky. The rustler Beasley crumpled in his saddle and fell against the horn, his hands dangling low on either side of his mount.

Easy whirled his six-shooter. There were still two guns against him. No time now to choose between targets. He took the nearest. It was Terrel's second accomplice. Easy didn't know his name.

The rustler was throwing his gun. He was a second too late. A bullet from Easy's gun spun him half out of the saddle. Terrel remained—unhurt; stocky and strong;

his dark face twitched into a wolfish snarl. He fired, even as Easy's gun cut down on him.

"Got me!" panted Easy.

The bullet had been like a thunderbolt. Placing dependance on Blazes, he had taken both feet from the stirrups before the fight began. Terrel's shot had struck his left arm and shattered it. It came with pile-driving force and knocked him overboard. He came down on the sorrel's off-side, sank to one knee and then crouched up again. Blazes was between him and Terrel. And Terrel, impatient to end the job, was charging forward.

Suddenly, Easy straightened, and threw his gun across Blaze's withers. Terrel's stocky shape loomed gigantic before him. Both men fired, the shots seeming to come as one.

The fight was over. The last shots had been fired. And one of them had found its mark.

IT was evening at the Half Circle M ranch, and Mary Bannister's excited call drew her father outside the house.

Her finger pointed out a strange conveyance that approached from the north. It was a spring-wagon drawn by two flying ponies whose wild plunges gave evidence of violent distaste for harness on their backs and a clattering vehicle at their heels. One of the ponies was a blaze-faced sorrel—Blazes by name. The other was the property of a man called Beasley.

"Howdy, folks," said Easy Andy McHale, pulling up at the house and stepping down on buckling long legs from the wagon seat. "I've come back to the Half Circle M, jest like I said I would. I've brung yuh three rustlers in my ol' spring-wagon. Here's Terrel an' Beasley and the other rustler gent. I don't know what yuh call him. They're shot up some, but in plumb good shape to be took on in to jail."

"You're shot, Easy!" cried Mary, bracing the wobbly cowboy. "Your arm!"

"By gatlins!" shouted Old Man Bannister. "He *has* got Terrel an' his two pards hog-tied in that wagon, shore enough!"

"Yessir," Easy responded. "I done it, jest to prove to yuh I ain't no cow-thief. Yuh'll find fifty head o' yore cattle over in a box canyon near my ranch. Terrel and his pards planned to ship 'em to Cactus Springs to-night. Here's some forged health an' shippin' certificates I found on Terrel—all made out ready to use. If yuh'll go to Buckman an' do some telegraphin', yuh can get back the forty steers that was stolen from yuh two-three nights ago. They're on a train headed west."

All the strength went out of Easy Andy's legs, and he sank to the ground.

"Durn it, boy, I've been a durn fool—callin' yuh a cow-thief!" blurted Old Man Bannister.

"Shucks, I'm all right, Mary. Jest a little weak, that's all," Easy tried to smile as Mary's arm went about him. "Please, girl, lift me up a little—kinda easy-like. Easy's my name, an' easy's my style, jest now. Lift me, easy—honey. Yore dad wants to shake hands with me."

And then he promptly forgot all about shaking Old Man Bannister's hand. For Mary's lips were pressed against his. And, after all, the love of Mary Bannister was the greatest reward that could possibly be won by Easy Andy McHale.

That Singin' Galoot

A NOVELETTE

By S. Omar Barker

When a cowboy falls head-over-spurs in love and then fights for his girl—singing all the while—he can sure ride in the "Double R" outfit. He's our kind of a hombre, isn't he, gals?

"As I walked out on the streets of Laredo,
As I walked out in Laredo one day,
I spied a poré cowboy wrapped up in white linen,
Wrapped up in white linen as cold as the clay.
Oh, beat the drum slowly and play the fife lowly—"

FOGHORN McCOY'S raucous baritone echoed in great bellowing noises in the sharp draws and cliffs of the Chihuahua hills. The wail of the old cowboy song boomed out loudly above the clattering and rumbling noises of the herd of 2,000 whitefaces he was helping trail eastward to the railroad at Agua Nueva. Dust swirled into his open

mouth, but still he sung, none too melodiously but with great gusto:

"Play the dead march as yuh bear me along;
Take me to the graveyard an' throw the sod o'er me—"

"Hey, Foghorn! Fer Pete's sakes!" yelled Dick Dilley in tones of anger and exasperation, interrupting him, "Why don't yuh shut up that bellerin' an' watch what yuh're doin'?"

Foghorn McCoy, engrossed in making the hills resound with song, had not noticed that half a dozen laggard cows and calves were being left behind at his side of the herd. With a shamefaced grin he turned to help the irate Dick Dilley pick 'em up. Even so he had to finish that particular stanza of his song before he could quit:

"For I'm a young cowboy, an' I know I've done wrong!"

"Yuh're durn right yuh have, Foghorn!" said Dick Dilley, straw boss of the drive, crossly. "It ain't only that your singin's plumb awful to listen to in the first place, nor that yuh always fergit what you're doin', but yuh don't seem to realize that the beller can be heard fer eight miles or more, an' that what you're really doin' is advertisin' to every Mex cow rustler, every bandit an' every Yaqui Injun in the country that we're passin' a herd through. Can't yuh shut up?"

Foghorn's big genial face reddened at the rebuke and his blue eyes flashed fire, but before he could answer, a calm, bell-toned feminine voice spoke at Dick's elbow.

"Don't be a silly grouch, Dick," it said. "Let him sing if he wants to. Sort of makes trail driving pleasanter, I reckon, doesn't it? Anyway, *I* like to hear it!" She turned in the saddle to smile winsomely at the big boy-faced Irishman the cowboys had nicknamed Foghorn. "Go on and sing, Mr. McCoy—one of those pretty little Mexican tunes. Don't pay any attention to Dick, he's harmless!"

Foghorn blushed as red as a roseberry and took an extra whack at a lagging cow with his rope to hide his embarrassment.

"He's boss, anyway, so I reckon I'd better hush up!" He grinned and started humming the dainty air of "Cielito Lindo." It is a tender Mexican love song, as quaint and romantic as turtle doves cooing in a cottonwood at the desert's edge, and he would have liked to be singing it, words and all, to Dick Dilley's pretty brown-eyed sister, who had come down to the Santa Clara and Bustillo country for the thrill of riding behind the herd with her brother and his punchers as they drove the War Finance Corporation cattle eastward to Agua Nueva for shipment back into the United States. Big Foghorn McCoy had first seen her at the Santa Clara ranch camp when Dick was giving her the brotherly devil for wanting to make the ride. The girl had not argued. She had just smiled at her brother's protests and come along, anyway, much to the joy of the punchers, some of whom had been months on the Mexican ranges without seeing an American girl.

As for Foghorn himself, her presence seemed to stir him to burst forth into continual song, and though the other punchers yowled at him to "swaller that racket," and the straw boss had bawled him out a dozen times already, Foghorn kept on bursting forth into some old ballad or Mexican ditty every mile or so. And June Dilley, judging from the smiles she gave him, liked to hear him, unmusical though his bellowing might sometimes be.

"June," thought Foghorn, was exactly the right name for this cowgirl sister of Dick's. There was a fresh, sunny softness about her that was like the month itself, and yet with it a clean-cut assurance and litheness that was like the unspoiled poise and beauty of greening mesas in the first rosiness of a June sunrise. She knew the ways of trail driving, too, and now, as she zigzagged back and forth behind the herd on a single-footing bay pony, Foghorn found it doubly hard to keep from letting out the surge of warmth in his heart in song. But Dick Dilley eyed him

warningly, and after all, Dick was not only his boss, but June's brother as well, so the big songbird cowboy limited himself to a low humming.

This was he third day on the eastward trail, and so far there had been no trouble from raiders, though Skeet Williams, manager of the outfit at Chihuahua City, had warned them to expect it. Five years ago some forty or more New Mexico cattlemen had faced utter ruin from drouth. Their cattle, mortgaged to the U. S. War Finance Corporation during the war, hundreds of them dying of starvation now, had not a chance to pay out. To save them, and save the government from undue loss, the New Mexico Livestock Loan Association had stepped in and shipped some seventy-five thousand head to the fine, unpastured Santa Clara and Bustillo ranges in Mexico. Now after four years there remained fifty thousand or more, in good shape all around, to be driven to Agua Nueva and thence shipped north into El Paso and sold. This herd of two thousand in Dick Dilley's charge was the first to be put on the trail.

The Mexicans of Chihuahua had come to look upon these herds as permanent assets upon their ranges, and they resented their removal. To some they had meant steady employment, to some rental fees for their grass, and to many the opportunity to sneak in and kill a bit of fresh beef for themselves from time to time, usually uncaught, for the range was vast and canyon-ribbed with much timber for concealment. Naturally the American range boss, a quiet, resolute youngster from Las Vegas, named J. H. Williams, Jr., and called "Skeeter Bill," expected some trouble for his herds on the trail. He, too, had advised Dick Dilley not to let his sister risk making the drive with them. She had come just the same, and had made such a good hand that, deep down in his heart, her brother was proud of her.

He was a little jealous of her, too, in a way that brothers often have. He didn't want her to go "throwin' herself away" on some "no-'count cowhand." She was educated and ought to have a better future than that. Morever, Dick Dilley didn't approve of the happy-go-lucky ways of Foghorn McCoy, despite the fact that he didn't dislike him personally. "If the big saddle-straddlin' phonograph just didn't have the idea he could sing and would hush up his bellerin'—" But even so, he didn't like the way his pretty sister had made friends so quickly with the man.

Now he motioned her to him from where she was riding next to Foghorn's section of the herd, and when she came alongside he admonished her in a low, growling tone:

"Lookahere, Sis, go easy on them smiles at that there no-'count loud speaker with so many tunes in his gizzard, *sabe?* And fer Pete's sake, quit askin' him to sing! He might git an idea back o' them vacant gray eyes o' his that you was shinin' up to him, an' I got enough troubles on this trip without havin' to knock the sentiment as well as the singsong outa Foghorn McCoy! Better cut around here an' ride on my left awhile!"

June flushed a little, but gave her brother a sparkling smile.

"Thanks, Mr. Foreman Dilley, for the advice," she said. "I'm sure Papa couldn't have done better if he were here himself!"

But instead of obeying him, she let her pony drift along at the heels of the herd to the right until she was riding once more with McCoy. Foreman Dick scowled after her in brotherly anger and disapproval and, under his breath, cussed a little about women in general and cowgirl sisters in particular. Then trouble off at the other side of the herd where some cattle had streaked up a side-canyon, attracted his attention and he went galloping around the left flank to help straighten them out.

June spurred up, shoved the usual lagging cows and calves into line and then rode closer to Foghorn. She could not help noting what a fine figure of a man he made in the saddle.

"Well, Mr. McCoy, Mr. Foreman Dick Dilley is gone now. So you'll sing some more for me, won't you?" she called out to him. "That funny Mexican one about 'The Cockroach'!"

Foghorn McCoy glimpsed the loveliness of her smile, even across the dusty backs of the cattle, and some hidden throb of his heart silenced his tongue. Not only could he not sing, but somehow he even failed to find words to answer her.

The drowsy haze of late September lay over the ridges and canyons of the Mexican hills. The clacking, thuddy sounds of moving cattle had become so monotonous as to seem to be sort of silence itself. Off to the right a canyon with the green splotch of a cottonwood clump in it opened up between mottled ledges. On up it, perhaps half a mile away, could be seen, through a sprinkling of pines, the honeycomb of ancient cliff-dwellings where the canyon apparently closed into an impasse. A strange atmosphere of the long-forgotten, romantic past seemed to hang over it all, and June Dilley felt its spell. She stopped her pony and looked, then called to Foghorn:

"If you're not going to sing, Mister Cowboy, I'm going to take a little side trip up to look at those cliff-dwellings, and I'll catch up with you in a half hour or so. Tell Dick when he shows up, will you?"

She turned her horse toward the side canyon. It was a moment before Foghorn could command his voice. Then he called to her, half commandingly, half pleadingly:

"Better not go off nowheres like that by yourself, Miss June! Safer to stay here with the herd. Might be Yaquis or Mexicans hidin' up there to grab you!"

"Booh! Who's scared?" she laughed back at him, spurring her horse into an easy lope. "Anybody can see there is no one up this harmless little canyon. See you later!"

He called to her again not to go, then turned and started to gallop after her to bring her back. Perversely she sped forward faster still, and he stopped.

After all, the canyon looked innocent enough. Like an open book it lay, all in plain sight up to the apparent impasse at its head. Yellow cliffs, reddish cliffs, gray cliffs, brown cliffs and some honey-combed with holes. Green cottonwoods, evidently about a spring, in the bottom of the draw, and the rest just silent, grassy gravel and a few scattered pines. It was all innocent of the least sign of human beings or horses. Yet the cliff ruins looked fascinating, and Foghorn didn't blame June for wanting to nose into them. More interesting for her than the dust of the trail and the company of a bashful cowboy like himself, anyway.

Foghorn turned back and began zigzagging at the back of the moving cattle caravan again. In a few minutes Dick Dilley showed up.

"Say," he exclaimed, "where's June?"

Foghorn told him.

"Hell! What did yuh let her go for? No place for a girl to go nosin' around alone up there," snorted the foreman.

"I reckon she'll be all right, Dilley. Said she'd catch up in half an hour. Anyway it didn't look like there was nothing up there to be scared of—bear, maybe. Reckon she'll be along again now any minute."

Foghorn reckoned wrong. The apparently empty cliff rooms of an ancient and forgotten race had not been as vacant as he imagined. Twenty minutes passed and there was no sign of June Dilley's returning. Foghorn suddenly became desperately uneasy.

"I'm goin' back to make sure she's all right," he announced, and set out. "I'll shoot if anything's wrong," he called back over his shoulder. Dick Dilley turned to follow after him, but suddenly changed his mind.

"Doggone fool girl had no business comin' in the first place," he grumbled. "But I reckon she's all right — just monkeyin' around snappin' pictures or somethin'." He scrutinized the general landscape lying in warm silence off to the right. A small part of the draw was still in sight and apparently empty. The herd was getting straggly and giving trouble. Most likely June was all right, anyway, and without Foghorn, he was needed here. He gave his attention to the cattle, grumbling to himself that sisters were a nuisance anyway.

When Foghorn McCoy reached the mouth of the daw, he saw the girl's horse standing peacefully enough under the cot-

tonwoods up toward its head. Looking higher up, he glimpsed the girl, too, climbing along a ledge from which she disappeared into a cliff-room where a row of them showed like doughnut holes against the cliff. He gave a sigh of relief. Evidently she was just exploring these ancient homes.

As Foghorn rode up the canyon he lost sight of her again, but thought nothing of it, as she had apparently been going from room to room. Nor was he inclined to hurry her. If she chose to explore cliff dwellings awhile, he could ride up the canyon and wait until she was ready to go. Relieved at finding her safe, he suddenly found the urge to sing welling up in him. With a slant look back toward the rumbly sound of the herd over the ridge of the draw, he turned loose:

"Come along, boys, an' listen to my tale,
I'll tell you of my trouble on the old
Chisum Trail.
Coma ti yi youpy, youpy ya, youpy ya,
Coma ti yi youpy, youpy ya!"

The echoes of the old song rolled from Foghorn's throat and rattled against the cliffs like the bellowing of a longhorn steer. Back at the herd Dick Dilley heard him, and little as he liked Foghorn's singing, for once he was glad to hear it. The sound reassured him.

"Foghorn's a doggone human slide trombone and a idjit an' all that," he remarked to a big Lazy R steer as he slapped him with his rope, "but he ain't the kind to be singin' if he hadn't of found her all right. Jest listen at him beller!"

But though Foghorn had glimpsed June once as he rode up the draw, he somehow did not see her again. He dismounted at the cottonwoods and left his horse there with hers. She did not answer his hallooing, and he had started to climb a ledge path, worn smooth by prehistoric brown feet, when suddenly an arm reached out from the round opening of one of the rooms, and the heavy thud of a rifle stock on his head struck him down. The cliff's face suddenly became alive with Mexicans, swarming out upon him like bees, and before he could recover enough from the dizziness of the blow on his head to yell for help, they had him bound and gagged.

As swiftly as they had appeared, the Mexicans, whom Foghorn could see to be about twenty in number, lifted him and carried him roughly into one of the cliff rooms. There they unbound his feet, but left a rope fastened to one foot. The other end was held by one of the Mexicans. Foghorn's hands were securely tied and his mouth gagged. There was a brief consultation in Spanish, which Foghorn understood perfectly. As he listened, he cursed himself for a fool for ever allowing June Dilley to come up here by herself. He heard his swarthy captors, Mexicans, not Yaquis, disagree over whether to kill him at once and get him out of the way, or hold him for ransom along with the girl. Then one short, chunky, round-faced hombre who seemed to be in authority spoke up:

"Vamos!" he exclaimed, and then in rapid Spanish: "We'll see whether to kill the gringo or not later. We've got to get out of here now quick! *Vamos! Pronto!"*

Three of them yanked Foghorn forward with orders to follow without resistance or be shot instantly. A lantern was lit and in its dim glow the cowboy saw that June Dilley was bound and gagged like himself. His eyes met hers and he tried agonizingly to make some sign of encouragement. He could see she had been crying, but was calm enough now. Under direction from the leader, a big Mexican picked the girl up and carried her. She tried desperately to resist, but could not. For a second the cowboy's blood boiled to the fighting point, but he held himself in check. It was not that he was afraid. But he realized that they would not hesitate to kill him, and dead he would be of no possible help to the girl.

The Mexicans carried the girl and jostled the cowboy along from one room to another through low, round passages and then along a narrow passage that emerged into daylight. Here, under a clump of cottonwoods, were horses waiting. The cowboy's hopes sank at the sight. If they were to be carried off farther into the in-

terior on horseback it might be days before Foreman Dilley and the boys could catch up with them, and in the meantime many things might happen. He offered resistance again when told to mount, kicking out sharply at the shins of one of the Mexicans. Swiftly the greaser drew a knife and stepped snarlingly toward him, but the leader, whom the others called Capitan Candido, interfered.

"Pendejo!" he growled, cuffing the man in the face and then knocking the knife from his hand. *"Ten cuidado! Estamos apurados, compadro! Vamos!"*

Then he and another lifted the cowboy bodily into the saddle, one mounted behind him and they were off at a gallop, Don Candido holding the girl before him on a big lanky gray.

To Foghorn's surprise they turned back north up another draw and halted at a cliff-hidden cabin not half a mile from where he and June had been captured, yet so secluded that one coming over the ridge from the north would never guess that anything was there.

Here there was much argument between the Capitan and his men, considerable grumbling and some under-breath cursing, with the final outcome that the Capitan's command prevailed. The idea, Foghorn gathered from their conversation, was this: June was to be held for a ransom of five thousand *pesos Americanos*. They had left a note to that effect pinned upon a rope strand across the narrow cliff cleft where the cowboys, tracking them, would be sure to find it. If the gringos would bring that amount there and leave it, not later than sun-up the next morning, the girl would be freed. If not—well, they could guess for themselves. If the *Americanos* should attempt any funny business, such as crawling on through the cleft in pursuit, the Capitan had men watching them from the cliffs with orders to shoot. In addition to which *la señorita de los ojos morenos* would not be heard of again.

Such was the import of the note, written in English by the Capitan, who alone knew anything but Spanish. Now the Capitan and two guards would stay here with the girl and keep her prisoner in this hidden cabin, while his men should return to the other canyon, there to hide in a concealed cluster of cliff rooms a quarter-mile down from the cleft, to guard against any surprise attack by the Americans should they take a chance and come through. One Mexican should go to relieve the watch at the narrow upper entrance to the draw every three or four hours. The rest should stay in the cliff rooms, their horses hidden in a nearby cove, ready for any attack.

"But they will not attack," grinned Capitan Candido. "Of that res' assured."

Gurgling, grunting, struggling vainly with lips and teeth to force the gag out of his mouth, Foghorn McCoy attracted the Capitan's attention.

"Is it not so, *chivo?*" he inquired of the cowboy, poking him tauntingly in the ribs with the barrel of his gun. Then when he saw that the gringo, instead of resisting, was trying desperately to speak, he untied the bandanna at the back of his neck and removed the gag. *"Que dices tu, guapo?"* he grinned.

Foghorn's tongue and jaws ached, but he managed to moisten them and speak in his captor's own language.

"You deceive yourself, Capitan! The vaqueros will attack and that quickly! They will kill all of you if one hair of the girl's head is harmed! You do not know the Americans!"

Foghorn watched the man's expression closely to see if his bluff was taking effect. The Capitan only grinned leeringly.

"Ah, so you think not like I say, Señor Gringo! Then listen: have I not learned who this girl is. Have I not told him on the paper that if just one man climbs through the cleft to this side of the ridge or just one shot is fired, then he will never see his sister again? You gringos, you are dogs, yes! Fools, yes! But you do not endanger the life of your sisters for a mere five thousand *pesos*. You do not fool me, *guapo!*"

He wiggled the muzzle of his gun ticklingly at the pit of Foghorn McCoy's stomach.

"As for you, well, we will ask no ransom for you. My *soldados* will take care

of you." He turned to the men. "Take him back to the Cuevas with you, *soldados mios*, and there, when you are hidden in the cliff rooms, in one of the dark ones where no one will find him—*zas!*" He made the significant motion of plunging a knife into the American's ribs. "What you think of that, *Señor?*"

Foghorn did not answer him. With tightly tied ropes still cutting into his wrists and a loaded gun exploring the front of his shirt, any kind of effective action was impossible, hard as it was to keep himself from lunging madly upon this greaser Capitan. And so, as a substitute for action, he was doing some quick, hard but apparently hopeless thinking.

June Dilley, still bound and gagged with a bandanna, had been set unceremoniously on the edge of the cabin porch. Her brown eyes were wide with appealing terror as they met Foghorn's. The cowboy could control himself no longer. He made a lunge toward the Mexican captain, but the man holding the rope tied to his ankle gave a sudden yank and he tumbled to the ground.

Then, at the Capitan's command, they ganged upon him, pummelled him thoroughly and then loaded him unceremoniously, with a Mexican to hold him, on one of their horses and set out in a gallop down the draw.

"Keep — up — courage, June!—Sweetheart!" he managed to call back hoarsely over his shoulder before a grimy Mexican hand was clapped over his mouth to silence him.

Gilded dust danced in the streaks of late afternoon sunshine and shadows as June Dilley, struggling frantically at her bonds, watched them go down the draw. Then all at once she fainted. With a curt order to the two men he had kept with him as guards, Capitan Candido, renegade of the Mexican army, picked up the unconscious girl and carried her inside the cabin.

It was a strange, weird and shadowy camp that the Mexicans carried Foghorn to, but it was ideal for their purpose. Back in a little cove out of sight was a spot for the horses, and then, up in a low ledge of cliff, several long empty rooms of the cliff-dwellers had been joined together into a big one overlooking the canyon securely and yet invisible to anyone upon whom they might wish to spy. They boosted Foghorn up into the room, where were camp beds and provisions strewn about. They lighted some candles and began hauling out food, as well as some bottles, obviously strong drink.

Outside the dusk that follows twilight was casting shadow ghosts, and already it was pitch dark in the cliff rooms.

"Joselino," said a smallish Mexican casually to another, "as soon as you have eaten, step into the *cuartito* there, will you, and stick your knife into the gringo. I had almost forgotten him!"

"Bueno, compadre!" grunted the other through a mouthful of cold beans.

Foghorn, listening in the darkness, bound and helpless, set his teeth grimly. Then, little as he felt that way about it, he began to croon softly the lilting melody of a Mexican song.

"Adelita se llama la ingrata,
La que era duena de todo mi placer—"

"Shut up in there!" growled one.

Joselino exclaimed, "If he likes to sing, let him sing! Soon he sings no more!"

"Que cante! Que cante 'La Adelita'!" urged half a dozen voices in chorus. "Come on, gringo! *Musica!* Give us more!"

Back in the dark of the cave room, the cowboy's heart was thumping excitedly, and though aches and bitter, raw pains stung his body, his hands and even his lips and tongue, he went on with the plaintive tune of "Adelita" that he had learned from the decent Mexican cowboys on the New Mexican ranges—on to the last of half a dozen verses:

"Y si acaso yo muero en campaña,
Si mi cadaver en la guerra va quedar,
Adelita, por Dios, te lo ruego,
Que con tus ojos te vayas a llorar!"

Some of his captors joined in nasally and all applauded enthusiastically when he finished.

"Look, gringo," called one. "You would make a better *Mejicano!* Give us another!"

"Gracias, amigos!" answered Foghorn in the most friendly tone he could muster. "But look: how can a man sing when he is hungry and thirsty and has ropes cutting at his wrists?"

"Bring him out, Joselino," ordered the little man who seemed to have assumed command in the Capitan's absence. "Unbind his hands, tie up his feet so there will be no running away, and give him to eat and drink. Then he shall sing some more. We can give him the knife later!"

Joselino helped Foghorn through the little round opening into the bigger room, dimly lit by candles. Assuming a friendliness he was far from feeling, the cowboy partook of the food they offered him and swigged at one of the bottles of what, in this country, would have been called "white mule." Yet even this vile liquor had a grateful feeling to his parched mouth and throat. But he drank carefully, taking only a little. Then, lest his audience should become impatient with him, he began singing again. This time, anxious to arouse them to a careless, noisy, hilarious pitch, he cut loose with a swaggering ditty called *"La Suegra"* (The Mother-in-law), some of the stanzas of which are pretty rough, even in Spanish:

"Ya mi hijo casó, ya tiene mujer,
Mañana saberamos lo que sabe hacer!"

Foghorn's judgment of the Mexicans was good. The song was a hit and he, realizing the ease with which Mexicans put off everything—even knifing a gringo—kept on singing all the little ballads Celestino had taught him on the Drag Arrow outfit up in New Mexico. Gradually, as the Mexicans laughed and sang more with him themselves, they likewise drank more and more, and seemed to forget that he was their prisoner.

But when he, judging the time was ripe, asked to be allowed to move nearer the outside opening so as to have fresher air for his lungs in singing, Joselino drew his gleaming knife.

"You think to escape, perhaps, mi *pájaro cantador?"* he asked.

Nevertheless, they let him move over close to one of the small outside openings, taking the precaution to slip an extra rope about his body upon which a half-drunk, waggish Mexican would yank in time to the tune of the moment.

Never in his life had songs seemed so to choke him. Never had they seemed such horrible, unreal things as now. Pangs of self-reproach, of anger, of hopelessness, kept stabbing through his heart as he thought of June, a prisoner and alone in the cabin back over the ridge to the west. He dared not let himself think about her, at the mercy of the Mexican captain there, for when he did, a helpless, frantic fear choked his singing—and he *must* keep on singing, singing, singing—

As soon as he had wailed out *"La Golondrina"* from his new place beside the cliff-room opening, he spoke, genially, in a pretended drunken, friendly tone:

"Now, my friends,—you like, maybe, to hear some of the ballads of the gringo, yes? Some of you will understand them?"

A chorus of mixed "yes" and "no" greeted him. Again the little man spoke.

"We understand them not," he said. "But what makes it the difference? We will like to hear them just the same!"

Hoarse though he was, Foghorn cleared his throat and sang, louder, clearer, yet with some caution, until the tones of his raucous baritone echoed and reechoed back to his ears from across the canyon:

"As I was a-walkin' one mornin' for pleasure,
I met a cowpuncher a-ridin' along;
His hat was throwed back an' his spurs was a-jinglin',
An' as I approached he was singin' this song:
Whoopee yee ti yo, git along little dogies,
It's yore misfortune an' none o' my own!
Whoopeeyee, ti yo, git along, little dogies,
Fer yuh know that Wyoming will be yore new home!"

The wail of the old trail song rolled sonorously out into the night, and in the big cliff room the Mexicans, now getting too drunk and hilarious for caution, applauded, cursed and drank a health to the *maldito gringo cantador.*

Louder, enunciating his words more clearly than before, Foghorn McCoy turned his face to the opening and began to bellow forth the next verse. But if any Panhandle cowboy had heard him he would not have recognized the words, for the singer was making them up as he went along.

Then when they had given him another drink, which he barely tasted, though pretending to take a long swig at the bottle, he switched his tune to "The Old Chisum Trail," and then to, "When You and I Were Young, Maggie," and "Old Kentucky Home," and so on and on. But the words were not the words of the songs he sang. Yet hope was once more in his heart—hope for the rescue of June Dilley —as he heard the clear-cut syllables of his bellowed words echoing loudly up and down the canyon.

It was only when the Mexicans, some of them dropping off to sleep, got tired of it and stopped him, that Foghorn McCoy ceased to sing. And then, to his surprise, instead of knifing him as the Capitan had ordered, they solemnly, formally and with much importance, took a vote and decided to confer a great honor upon him in return for his singing. "The honor, Señor Gringo, will be this: You shall not die shamefully by the knife! As soon after daylight as may be, we will give you military glory! You shall die in state, facing a firing squad of the free soldiers of Mexico!"

IN the chunk of a cabin hidden back in the gorge to the westward, June Dilley lay, on a rude cot, handcuffs on her hands, her feet bound with buckskin thongs, listening, as if in a nightmare, to the rasping snoring of Capitan Candido, asleep on the floor across the narrow room. She reproached herself bitterly for not having heeded Foghorn's warning not to ride up to the cliff ruins alone. How angry Dick would be! He would blame Foghorn for it! What a lot of grief and trouble she was causing everybody! Yet frightened, hopeless as she was, she was thankful things were no worse.

"To-night," Capitan Candido had explained in his broken English, "the *señorita* ees have no cause for 'fraids! It ees money—the five thousand that ees want for the Capitan Candido and not the gringo gwomans! For why should me want thees crazee gringo gwomans when it be so much plenty *muchachas Mejicanas* too much more pretty? Don't have no 'fraids — to-night — but eef in morning—*mañana*—no comes the dinero—then eet look like me, Capitan Candido, he have to take—! We wait see! To-night no have 'fraids for me. To-morrow—*mañana—quien sabe?*"

Whereupon he had lifted her onto the cot, rubbing his black whiskered face against hers for one horrible moment as if by way of demonstration, laughed hoggishly and yanked off his boots. Then he rolled up in his *serape* and dropped off to sleep, leaving the two men to alternate at guard outside, secure in the assurance that the *vaqueros Americanos* would risk no attack that might endanger their *señorita.* And even if they did, would never stumble upon this hut, hidden as it was in the overhung crook of an unknown gorge.

Noisy, loathsome as was the sound of the Capitan's snoring, to the captive girl it was a grateful sound, and in her heart she prayed that it might not cease through the night.

WHEN, after an hour of impatient scanning of the trail behind, listening worriedly, neither June nor Foghorn had returned to the herd, Dick Dilley had stopped swearing about it, left his two Mexican punchers and two others to hold the herd together, and had ridden, grim-faced and silent, back to the Cliff Dweller Canyon. His mind was made up about one thing. If, instead of being in trouble, he should find Foghorn McCoy taking advantage of this situation to loiter along and try to make love to his sister, Dick Dilley aimed to have a showdown right then and teach the "big bird" a lesson.

At the mouth of the draw he and his men saw the two horses still standing in the shade of the cottonwoods by the spring up toward the head, and Dick became doubly sure that he would have the pleasure of telling "that singin' galoot of a cowboy" what he thought of him. He hallooed loudly, calling June's name in a tone of stern authority. His only answer was a hundred choppy echoes from the honeycomb cliffs and the rasping call of a hawk put to wing by the sound.

Pale of face with the fear for June's safety that was swirling through his blood, Foreman Dick ordered the boys to scatter and search the cliffs. It was he himself who first came upon the scratchy tracks of many boots before a ledge of cliff rooms. He called the others, and together, by the light of many matches, they managed to trail out the direction of the tracks, follow them through the narrow passage, every man with his gun ready, and emerge suddenly into daylight in the narrow cleft.

Here a rope strand, from which dangled a grimy envelope marked *"Para los Americanos,"* barred their way. Dick seized the paper, guessing in advance its import. It was miserably scrawled, but the instructions were unmistakable. 5,000 dollars in American gold or silver or its equal in Mexican currency to be placed here not later than sun-up to-morrow morning, and within two hours afterward the girl would come walking back to them, free and unhurt, through the passage to the cliff rooms. Failure to bring it and the girl would simply disappear for good. One step through the cleft beyond this rope, one belligerent move, one shot—well, it would be seen or heard and the girl would pay for it—they might guess for themselves how.

"The dogs!" exclaimed Big Boy Ray, starting forward. "It's a bluff! Come on, let's clean 'em out!"

Dick Dilley caught his arm sharply.

"For God's sake, Big Boy, stop! You don't know how the Mexes are here in their own country! Kidnapping for ransom is their business, and they make good on threats like that. If we are to save June we've got to do like they say and work fast and not make no breaks, savvy? First the money. One of you git to the railroad and either git to Chihuahua or git hold of Skeeter on the wire and raise the five thousand. Skeet will know how to do it. Charlie, you're light. You make that ride. Sam, you ride back to the range where Salem's got the boys gatherin'. Git ever' American yuh can an' ride back hellbent! They may not come through with the prisoner even if we deliver the money, and if they don't—well, then we'll have to fight 'em! But we can't git no horses through here. When yuh come back, Sam, drop across these ridges farther down and come up from the south side. But don't show up until two and a half hours after daylight. Give 'em time to bring June back safe, first. Now ride, cowboys, like all hell! Me and Big Boy an' George will stay on watch."

The young foreman's face was like yellow parchment, and tears of helpless anger stood in his eyes. He dispatched George Nichols back to the herd to tell the boys to be in readiness for trouble. Then he and Big Boy stood in the cleft of the cliff, watched from somewhere by unseen eyes, and did their best by arm waving to signal "yes," so that the Mexicans might know they had agreed to the terms of the ransom.

The enforced inaction was torturing, but Dick and Big Boy Ray stayed with it. Towards dusk George came back with another man from the herd to report everything quiet there. They brought food for the watchers and remained with them.

Darkness came on in the canyons with a dance of weird, silent shadows and an unearthly hooting of owls, intensifying rather than breaking the silence. Faint sounds, as of distant horses and men, drifted up from the south. Silence again, and then a muffled sound of singing, too far away for understanding, yet with the unmistakable wail of a Spanish *canción* about it.

They listened to its droning, and then suddenly it seemed nearer, clearer, and though the words were the Spanish ones of "La Golondrina," the voice was unmistakably familiar:

"Foghorn!" whispered Big Boy.

With startling clearness, then, there rose from somewhere out down the canyon, in a raucous, echoing baritone, the familiar words:

"As I was a-walkin' one mornin' for pleasure—"

And presently, bellowed forth:

"Whoopee yee ti yo, git along little dogies!—"

Dick Dilley swore bitterly.

"The low-down cowardly renegade, songbird son of a phonograph!" he exclaimed. "He'd sing if somebody was hangin' his mother!"

But in another minute Dick Dilley sat bolt upright, straining his ears to listen, and the others with him. The tune was the same, but the words, clear-cut even in the whine of the old song, ran like this:

"Oh, Dick Dilley, Sam, Pete an' Big Boy Ray,
If yuh're anywheres around, oh, please listen to what I say:
It's Foghorn Mac tied an' bound like a chunk
Pretendin' to be singin' songs to Mexkins which are drunk.
Oh, listen, boys! Fer God sakes now listen to me hard,
June's in a shack the next draw west with jest three men fer guard.
Don't wait to pay no ransom, and don't come in through here,
Climb up the cliffs back west and the hut she's in's right near.
Sneak on your bellies in the dark, then hide until the moon,
An' yuh can sneak down in the draw and find the place right soon.
Don't start now for a minute if you've heard what I've said, boys,
'Cause there's more you need to know and I've got to stop fer breath."

The singing stopped.

"Ol' Foghorn! The crazy dumned hero!" whispered Big Boy Ray.

"Listen!" said Dick Dilley.

Once more, this time to the high-pitched tune of "When You and I Were Young, Maggie," there drifted up the canyon more information, and directions by means of which June Dilley could be rescued from the Mexican Capitan.

Finally there came the words:

"I've told yuh all I know now once, and if yuh've heard it all,
Don't wait no longer, get to climbin', boys, the ol' cliff wall!
I'll sing it all over again and after while some more,
But fer God sakes if yuh've heard it once, go now! Don't wait to hear no more!"

Swiftly in the black shadows Dick Dilley, Big Boy, and two others crept back through the cliff rooms, out into the canyon, mounted, circled westward, left their horses and began climbing. Pulling up by ropes hooked to perilously stubby pine trees, roots and shrubs, creeping like great, silent, black lizards of the night, they worked their way over the cliffy brinks of the ridge where they could drop into the next draw west of the caves. It was slow, hazardous going, but they made it and managed somehow to ease themselves down into the canyon without attracting attention.

There they crept until, from a cove under overhanging rocks, they heard a sound. Regular, muffled yet heavy, it pulsated through the blackness.

"Somebody snorin'," whispered Big Boy. "Let's lay still till the moon."

The moon flecked its misty rays like ghost fingers upon the ridges, and slowly, slowly, a weird gray light illumined the canyon until the cowboys could make out the outline of a cabin under the cliff and at its corner the figure of a man.

Five minutes later Big Boy's heavy gun thudded suddenly and almost soundlessly back of the unsuspecting ear of the sleepy Mexican guard and he went down in a heap on the ground. In the next instant Dick Dilley stumbled upon another man asleep by the door. The man awoke with

a curse, and the snoring inside the cabin suddenly ceased.

Dick Dilley's gun flashed and the second Mexican guard slumped down.

In the flash of mere seconds there was the sound of a man getting heavily to his feet, curses, and a girl's tremulous cry inside the cabin. Then Dick Dilley, standing to one side of it, put his hand upon the heavy latch of the door. A gun boomed and a bullet splintered through the wood into his forearm. Surprised, still half asleep, Capitan Candido was putting up a wild, futile fight.

Afraid to shoot through the door for fear of hitting the girl, the cowboys drew back. The sound of running footsteps came from inside, then the door suddenly opened. Big Boy Ray dashed around the corner of the house, dropping to his knee at the corner and firing three times in rapid succession. Capitan Candido buckled and crumpled to earth as he ran.

In another moment June Dilley was crying in her brother's arms.

There were swift explanations, then a hard, hasty climb back over the cliffs to the north side of the ridge, for it was their guess that no Mexicans had dared remain on that side, and from here they could seize horses from the ready remuda and gallop around to a lower crossing of the hills and come up on the captors of Foghorn in Cave Canyon. It would be swift riding, swift shooting now, and the cowboys—guns at hips and rifles in scabbards—were eager to go.

June Dilley, her brown eyes haunted with fear for the safety of the big singing cowboy whose ingenious bravery had saved her, rode with them, a long barreled thirty-eight at her thigh and determination in her heart.

THE sun was up and shining on the cliffs of the Canyon de las Cuevas when Charlie Zook, with Mexican currency to the value of $5,000 in a packet on his saddle, spurred his lathered horse up the draw to the honey-combed ledge at its head, dismounted and leaped swiftly into the dark passage that led through to the cleft where the ransom was to be left. Madly and swiftly as he had ridden, he feared that he was too late.

But when he came out into the cleft he found no cowboys waiting there. But down in the southern drop of the canyon Foghorn McCoy was standing back against the cliff, bareheaded and blindfolded. Twenty steps in front of him stood four Mexicans with rifles at "ready." Roundabout were others, and nearby stood a small man with hand uplifted, as if ready to give command. Then to Charlie's amazed ears came the bellow of Foghorn McCoy's voice resounding against the cliffs: "The Cowboy's Lament":

"There is another more dear than a sister,
And if she weeps bitterly when I am gone,
Just tell her I loved her and died thinking of her,
For I'm a young cowboy and they say I've done wrong.
Then swing your rope slowly and rattle your spurs lowly,
And give a wild whoop as yuh bear me along;
And in the grave throw me—"

The voice faltered.

The little Mexican leader called a command. The men of the firing squad brought their guns to an aim. The song went on:

"an'
—roll the sod o'er me,
For I'm a young cowboy an'—"

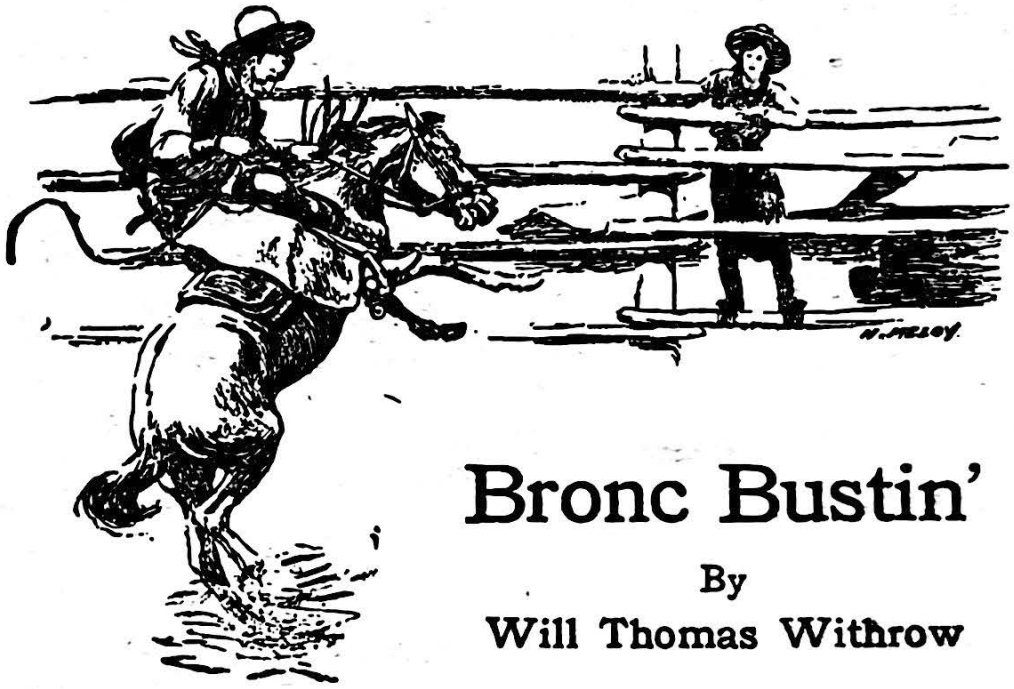
Charlie Zook yanked out his six-gun and fired frantically at the ragged firing squad.

The sudden rattle of rifle fire drowned out the sound of singing and matched the roar of his own gun. But when he looked, it was not Foghorn McCoy that had fallen. It was three of the firing squad themselves and the man who had stood with hand uplifted in command. Rifles continued to crack and a dozen or more horsemen swooped up the canyon, yelling and firing madly. Charlie, when he saw

who they were, gave a wild yell of joy and began clambering down toward them.

He got there in time to see Big Boy lining up the few Mexicans remaining alive. At the foot of the cliff wall sat June Dilley, her brown eyes misty with happy tears. In her lap was the grimy, disheveled head of Foghorn McCoy, no longer singing, yet with more songs in his heart than he had ever known before.

And strangely enough, when June bent down to kiss Foghorn's parched lips, Foreman Dick Dilley, watching anxiously on one knee beside them, smiled and said, "Now yuh can sing the 'Weddin' March,' yuh songbird of the prairies."



Bronc Bustin'

By

Will Thomas Withrow

NOW bustin' broncs, an' bustin' life,
They're purty much the same,
Which I remarks that either one
Is a he-hombre's game,
An' a rider which pulls leather,
When he's doin' of his ride,
Is plum' finished altogether,
For he gits disqualified.

THE gents which tops the buckers
Entered in life's rodeo,
Same as them which forks the twisters
In a travelin' Wild West Show,
Finds they've got to ride accordin'
To a certain set o' rules,
Which they ain't no way o' learnin',
'Cept in life's hard ridin' schools.

GOT to set straight in yer saddle,
Keepin' both han's off yer mount;
If yuh busts the rules, yuh're busted,
Which it means yuhr ride don't count;
An' yuh got to keep rememberin'
Yuh can't never fool the crowd
With a fake ride—an' that also
Pullin' leather ain't allowed.

WITH a bronc, yuh got to make him
Know his master is on top;
That his buckin' an' sunfishin'
Ain't enough to make yuh flop;
Which the same applies to ridin'
In life's greater Wild West Show,
Settin' straight up in yer saddle,
Goin' whar yuh aim to go.

The Wrong Miss Wright

By Isabelle M. Horn

Jab Johnson was responsible for the whole business. And can't these Western men make a mess of things! Hombre, you done said it!

THE morning stage from Carson City arrived at Jasper Junction sometime before noon. The occupants of the front porch of the Rogers House, wide-eyed with interest, watched Jab Johnson, the driver, swing open the door with a sweeping air of grandiloquence. The new arrival disappeared into the lobby, and Jab, following with a heavy suitcase, hissed sibilantly behind his hand to the onlookers.

"P-s-s-s-t! Old Man Wright's kin! One of the heirs!" pointing importantly to the small black letters on one end of the suitcase, "E. M. Wright, San Bernardino."

There was a craning of necks and then a subdued babel broke out among the group. It waxed so heated that for a few moments it seemed quite likely that it might even reach the ears of the subject under discussion, who was just then quietly registering her arrival.

"Niece, ain't she? Bet them city folks don't come out here to th' ranch any more'n they kin help. Th' bright lights 'll git most of the old man's dough."

"Something like two million, I heard he left!"

"Two million, hell! The mine at Virginia City alone's worth twice that—"

"Th' cussed old robber couldn't take it with him, that's a cinch!"

And at this point Jab reappeared, executed an Indian war dance. Grinning at the crowd, he said, "Line forms at the end of Main Street, gents, an' don't crowd! It's *Miss* Wright, gang, an' don't overlook that th' old man corralled most of the loose cash in Washoe County."

The stage was swallowed up in a cloud of dust and the discussion on the Rogers House porch continued. Soon the idle speculations concerning the Wright family and its fortunes simmered down into something more personal as individuals

began to appraise themselves, respectively. One and all of them seemed to conclude simultaneously that the noonday meal at the Rogers House would soon be ready and it was better than a hundred to one shot that Miss Wright might also be hungry about that time.

"Kinda guess I'll slip over an' get a shave," mumbled Bill Potter, a little diffidently, edging toward the steps.

"Me, too!" "Reds" Walker, his partner in the W-P outfit, jumped up with alacrity at this breaking of the ice. "Been wantin' to get over to Tony's place all morning. Hadn't any idea it was gittin' so late."

The porch was suddenly quiet after the noisy chatter, although the sole remaining occupant took no more notice of their departure than he had of the previous discussion. His chair was tilted back against the wall at a precarious angle, wide hat pulled far down over his eyes, and he smoked slowly, with entire indifference to his surroundings. But underneath the brim of the hat, blue eyes smoldered with a fury that would have startled a casual onlooker, while the fingers of his right hand clenched almost painfully.

Wright! Old Man Wright! Hal Justin's brain seethed with the bitter memories conjured up by that name. Jacob Wright, the powerful mine owner; the political czar; the greedy possessor of thousands of acres of rolling hills covered with bunch grass, so that his cattle in uncounted thousands grew fat while their owner's pocketbook grew fatter. And joining the vast Wright domain on the west was the insignificant Justin homestead of six hundred and forty acres, with its few hundred head of cattle, its fertile patches of bright green alfalfa and its happy little family.

Hal Justin unclenched his brown fingers and momentarily covered his eyes, for crowding in on him in a kaleidoscopic panorama was the growing menace of his adolescent years — Jacob Wright and his unholy determination to oust the "dirty nester," as he openly referred to Hal's father. And the original reason for his enmity—later it was the stubbornness with which they fought him—was the tiny stream which trickled through the very heart of the Justin ranch.

Because of it, the desert slopes of Justin's homestead, under his skilful manipulations, became green and fertile, a small orchard sent out its fragrant blossoms every springtime around the cosy cabin. That precious stream, tumbling cold and clear, wound near the border line of the Wright ranch and there turned with a laughing gurgle back to the valley where the alfalfa waited for it.

Water! The rich neighbor had a sufficiency for his needs, even before the great irrigation project trebled the wealth of his holdings. But in that arid land where water was wealth and power, the determination to have the tiny Justin ranch for his own became to Jacob Wright an obsession.

And the end? Hal Justin stiffened and the legs of his chair met the floor with a bang. The ranch was still his own. His father had sacrificed his life for it. Young Hal, harassed in every conceivable manner almost to the point of desperation, through the courts and in other more primitive ways, had held on grimly.

And now Jacob Wright was dead, and, as Bill Potter had remarked, "He couldn't take it with him."

"I beg your pardon," a hesitating voice spoke from the door. "Are you Mr. Justin?"

Hal rose, pulled off his sombrero, and with the spell of his bitter musings still upon him, nodded stiffly.

Eleanor Wright advanced from the doorway slowly, somewhat daunted by the uncompromising sternness of the man's face before her.

"Mr. Rogers said you were driving back to Piñon Valley shortly, and I'd like —that is—I have business out that way. I wondered if you'd allow me to go out with you. I'll be glad to pay—" she added hastily.

Hal's face was a granite mask. The Wrights! A service to any member of that clan! It was unthinkable! His words came almost from between his teeth.

"I'm a cattleman, not a chauffeur. Besides I've got my horse to-day and not the car. There's a garage at the end of the street!"

He flicked the tops of his high boots with his leather gloves, scratched a match on a porch column to light his cigarette, and moved indifferently down the steps and across the dusty road. He stubbornly refused to admit to himself that he had observed the quick flush which had dyed the girl's face at his insulting answer and the almost unbelievably hurt look in wide, friendly brown eyes.

And he didn't look back to see her glance around the deserted porch, then slowly ascend to her room.

A hungry lot of cowboys stormed the dining-room with unaccustomed meekness that midday. But although they could hardly eat for the close attention they gave the doorway, the object of their solicitude did not appear.

Several weeks had passed since Hal Justin's first encounter with Eleanor Wright, and he had deliberately put off another visit to Jasper Junction because of the possibility of meeting her. He threw himself into the fall work of the range with a sort of desperate energy, while his men privately cursed his unremitting efforts and the pace he set.

But in spite of it all, at the most unexpected intervals, in the morning sunlight as it filtered through the cottonwoods or under the stars as he rode home at night, and even in the flickering flame of his log-fire in the lonely cabin, that small friendly face, the startled flush were before him.

At last, however, he went into town. There would be mail waiting for him at the post office, and supplies were needed from the store. But he would not take the chance of going by way of the county road, which ran past the gates of the Wright ranch house. He gave this a wide berth, and instead, bearing eastward where the Justin ranch joined an abandoned homestead, took an old, little-used trail which led down into Jasper Junction.

Rounding the curve of a low hill, he pulled up short. From a small log cabin some distance back from the trail, a thin curl of smoke was drifting. A sound of hammering came to his ears, and as is the habit with lonely outdoor folks, he spoke aloud to his horse.

"It looks like we've got neighbors, Fritz. Sure never thought old Simpson'd give up that claim, unless it's the old boy himself that's come back. Suppose we mosey over and say howdy."

As Hal rode up to the house the sound of hammering ceased. He knocked and after what seemed quite a long time, the door opened. Eleanor Wright stood framed therein, the plain blue suit in which he had first seen her now replaced with knickers of brown corduroy and a khaki shirt. She raised her arm to push a mop of tumbled brown hair away from her eyes. Her right hand clasped the barrel of a useful looking Winchester rifle.

With cold brown eyes absolutely devoid of a sign of recognition, she met his embarrassed gaze.

"Did you wish something?" she asked in the same tone she might have used to a tramp.

"I—I thought—I didn't expect—" Hal could have bitten his tongue out at his clumsy stammering, but it seemed an utter impossibility for him to speak coherently.

"I'm sure you've made a mistake. The road is over there," and with a nod closed the door.

He turned his horse mechanically toward the trail, and when at the end of the twelve miles, Jasper Junction hove into sight, he had long since run entirely out of epithets to hurl at himself.

He went straight to Jim Rogers at the hotel and began to ask questions. The proprietor was voluble and explicit.

"Say, that was sure a good one on the boys," he chuckled delightedly. "See that bunch of buckaroos out there? They hung around here for two days steady, faces and hands so clean their own mothers wouldn't a-knowed 'em. Every time Miss Eleanor showed up on the porch or in the dining-room they fell over themselves trying to do things for her. Fat Williams meets her on the top of the steps just as

she is startin' out for Piñon Valley. He aims to tell her the flivver is ready an' waitin', and bows so low he loses his balance and goes down backwards bouncin' like a rubber ball. Lord, the gang sure handed him a razz!"

"But how does she land out on Simpson's homestead?" Hal wished the genial proprietor wouldn't be quite so voluble and would get more quickly to the point.

"Oh, that! Well, you see, she ain't none of that Wright kin over yonder a-tall. Name's the same but that's all. Her pa and old man Simpson prospected around the Mohave together while th' kid was in school in San Bernardino. When Simpson passed out they found he'd kept up his taxes reg'lar here, an' had left the ranch to his partner. When the girl got out o' school, her dad had contracted asthmy, or some durn disease that never lets up its grip on you, and they ain't much money left, so they decides to come up here an' try out the climate for the old man's health. Miss Eleanor comes on first. Say, you was here that day she got in, wasn't you?"

Hal nodded.

"Seems to me I told her you'd take her out there," Rogers ruminated thoughtfully. "Well, anyway, she gives th' place th' once-over, an' goes back for her dad and th' furnishin's, what little they brung. I been a-sendin' one o' th' boys out every week with her mail an' she gives him th' order for whatever she needs for the next time. She ain't got no horse or nothin' jest yet, but, my stars, she's one game little kid, though. Say, that reminds me—"

He ducked under the counter.

"I got some stuff to send out to her. The order jest came in yesterday an' wasn't goin' out till next week. She'll be pleased as punch to git it so quick. I want you to take it over."

Hal attended to his own affairs, and before two o'clock was on the return trip. In spite of a reluctance which amounted almost to physical illness at the thought of raising his shamed eyes again to the girl's face, it was impossible for him to offer any adequate excuse for not performing the errand.

He devised a hundred ways as his horse followed the homeward trail in which he might effect delivery of the packages and escape without being seen, while each succeeding mile brought him no nearer a solution.

The problem was unexpectedly solved for him. As he rode up to the little cabin Eleanor was outside nailing down the loose planks which constituted her front steps.

With characteristic directness Hal came to the point at once. He dismounted, fished out her parcels, and laid them in a heap on the step. Then, hat in hand, his blue eyes met hers squarely, nor did they flinch under her hostile gaze.

"Miss Wright, if you'd let me explain my insane action the other day, p'raps you could understand what made me do it. As long as I'll never forgive myself for the ornery fool I was—I haven't any hope that you could overlook it—but—" and here the blue eyes seemed to darken with the passionate pleading in their depths, "but if you'd jest let me tell you *why* I was so—"

The small person looking up at him, stared at that squared jaw, just as it was that first awful time. Only the eyes were so different now.

"I—I—don't know—I don't want to hear! Oh, it was terrible to humiliate me like that—"

In spite of her determination to ward them off, hurt tears welled up in her eyes.

Hal swallowed with difficulty and took a half step toward her.

"God! I don't blame you for hatin' the sight of me," he said somewhat thickly. "I'll go to my own place over the hill there and never bother you again. But, please, you *must* listen, this once—"

And then rapidly, with a desperate earnestness, he sketched the years which embraced the enmity with old Jacob Wright, stretching from his boyhood, blighting his youth, bringing its toll of misery, and ending only with old Wright's death: the assumption of the stage driver and the others, that she was the Wright heiress, or one of them, here to inspect her inheritance; his bitterness coming to

that dreadful climax when she spoke to him on the hotel porch.

He turned blindly away when he had finished, and strode toward his waiting horse.

"Don't go." Eleanor's soft voice sounded behind him, a firm little hand clutching his arm. "I'm sorry, awfully sorry, about your troubles, and everything. You must have suffered a lot. Come inside and meet my dad—he's been lonesome with nobody here but me to keep him company."

While he chatted man-fashion with the invalid, Eleanor set out their simple supper and invited the guest to share it. Later he helped her with the dishes while she chattered gaily, until gradually she saw the hard lines of his face melting into an almost boyish softness, at the unaccustomed cheerfulness which his life had singularly lacked.

Still later under the stars, she said, "I don't blame you a single bit for just hating the name of Wright—"

He mounted his horse and then reached down to grasp her hand. Leaning far over he held it for an instant against his lips.

"I don't like the name," he said. "But there's a way to change it."

And there was!

UTAH'S FANTASTIC "CITY OF STONE"

THIS year thousands of tourists will avail themselves of the opportunity to gaze upon the greatest stone city in the world, the weird and mysterious rock formations located in the vast amphitheater of Bryce Canyon, in eastern Utah.

The Mormon pioneers, the first white men to gaze upon Utah's fantastic "City of Stone," regarded it as a bewildering combination of heaven and hell, in which the angelic phase predominated.

The phenomenon in the canyon is a miracle of erosion, a fantasy of color. From the depths of the canyon there are visible myriads of the stone formations, in a variety of bizarre forms—human, animal and geometrical, lighted with strange radiance. In these rocks may be read the first chapters of geologic history.

Scientists say that this region has undergone transitions from sea bottom to mountain peak. It has been broken and tilted by tremendous displacements, scorched and branded by intense volcanic action.

Although called a canyon, this natural wonder is not really a canyon. It is a vast amphitheater of horseshoe shape, graven some 1,000 feet deep into the sandstones on the eastern edge of the Paunsaugunt Plateau at the headwaters of the Pahreah River; it is approximately two miles wide and three miles long, and its rim is 8,000 feet in elevation. The area of the whole is 7,440 acres.

In the maze of architecture rising from its sunken gardens, where pine, spruce and manzanita spread their greens, there are the styles of China and Egypt, of the Toltecs, Incas, Greeks and Goths, but stronger, perhaps, is the resemblance to those decaying Dravidian temples, bursting with decoration, in the jungles of Burma and Java; pagodas, mosques, minarets, kiosks, fairy castles, cathedrals, theaters, flying buttresses and stairways, suspension bridges and many other effects. All of the architects of antiquity might have drawn their inspiration from the silent depths of Bryce.

Easy trails lead into the abyss, and the trip may be made on foot or horseback. Lacy designs and dainty figures, seen from the rim, assume huge proportions when one is among them; there are sunless grottos and shadowed crypts, wafer walls pierced by many windows, artists' studios filled with half-finished models and figurines, innumerable fantastic forms in colors of bronze, jasper, ruby, amethyst, topaz and alabaster. Each turn in every innumerable aisle, alley and corridor on Bryce's intricate floor has its charming revelations of unimagined contour and color.—*N. Y. American.*

The Windy Westerner

By John Johnson

Like a cyclone Henry Stevens blew into Indianola. WINDY? That hombre could talk yuh deaf, dumb and blind, and then not be satisfied. Yet Indianola let him live, and that proves that the windy cowboy couldn't have been all wind.

IN Indianola there is not many windbags. Out here jaspers that talk too much generally go East and become lawyers. Or if they stay here they say something they shouldn't of said, and then somebody up and ventilates them, and they get planted at an early age. Consequently, the male population is reasonably sparin' when it comes to slingin' words, with the excepshun of Angel Hooker.

But there was once a buckaroo among us what had his tongue hinged in the middle and kept both ends goin' steady. He had plenty of brass to go with it, and as soon as he arrived things commenced to get noisy.

There was a bunch of us eatin' supper in Angel Hooker's restrunt one night, when a stranger blowed in. He was a tall, broad-shouldered hombre in cowpuncher's riggin', and the layer of dust on him was half an inch thick.

He got inside the door and bellers to the world in general, "You oughta sprinkle yore streets here, fellows! This dust has plumb spoiled my beauty." Then he took off his hat and commenced beatin' his clothes with it.

Within two shakes, the atmosphere of that restrunt was so thick with dust you could cut it with a knife, and I couldn't see more'n three feet. I was some riled. "Hey, you!" I shouts, "cut that out!"

The young fellow stopped his dustin', and looked at me with a twinkle in his gray eyes. "And who might you be?" he asks.

"I am Walrus Jones, the Deputy Sheriff and Justice of the Peace of this here community," I responds, shinin' my star, "and if any young mavericks disturb the peace, I put 'em in the jug."

The stranger stared at my long, droopin' white mustache, and grinned. "Well, I b'lieve the Walrus part, anyway," he says. Then, before I could give him a hot answer, he continues, "Mr. Jones, this is a great day in the history of this town."

"How's that?" I asks.

"Henry Stevens has arrived here in Indianola to-day," he says.

"Henry Stevens? I never heard of the hombre," objects Lobo Jim, raisin' a forkful of beans to his mouth.

The young fellow bowed low, with a solemn look. "Gents, I am Henry Stevens in person," he replies.

Lobo Jim was so surprised at this that he swallered his beans whole, and we had to pound him on the back to keep him from chokin'. When order was restored, we all sat starin' at the stranger like we couldn't believe he was human.

At last Angel Hooker spoke up. "Son," he says innocent-like, "I bet I can guess yore nickname."

"What is it?" asks Stevens.

"I'd say yore friends call you Windy," drawls Angel.

The newcomer gave a start. "Why, who told yuh?" he asks, surprised.

Angel grinned, and winked at us. "That's a secret power of mine," he replies.

For thirty seconds, Windy Stevens sat quiet on his stool. Then the waitress came in from the kitchen to take his order, and he perked up again.

This here waitress, she was enough to make anybody perk up. She was straight and slim with natural rosy cheeks and yellow hair, and big blue eyes from which one glance would cause any normal hombre to turn flip-flops.

When Windy seen her first he just stared goggle-eyed. Then he spoke up; 'nothin' under the sun could keep him from speakin' up fer more'n a minute. "Are yo real, ma'am, or does my eyes deceive me?" he asks.

The waitress, which same was named Ellen Taylor, didn't bat an eye. "Order, please?" she asks business-like.

"Pork and beans," responds Windy dreamy-like, "also yore eyes are just—" but Ellen walked out in the kitchen as if they was no one speakin'.

When she was gone, Windy shook his head. "Where have I been all my life?" he says. "Walrus, you have been concealin' somethin' from me, yore ole friend. Who is she?"

"Since I never laid eyes on yuh till ten minutes ago, we ain't old friends exactly," I retorts, "but I'll tell you anyway." I goes on to explain that the girl is Ellen Taylor, the daughter of an old-time rancher, and now an orphan. She worked in Angel's restrunt and stayed nearby with an old square-jawed widder named Mrs. Gates. Half the young fellers of Indianola and vicinity was sighin' fer her (meanin' the girl, and not the widder) but she wouldn't have much to do with any of 'em, and laughed at 'em when they came courtin'.

"Well, the rest of the boys can pull their freight," comments Windy when I finished, "from now on *I'm* takin' up most of the young lady's time."

He had just seen Ellen for the first time, and now he was already puttin' in a claim fer her! This stranger shore was as windy as they make 'em, and he had the nerve of a brass monkey besides. Angel shook his head wonderin'-like, and Lobo Jim made a sign to me askin' whether he could break a plate over Windy Stevens' head. This request was right in line with my own feelin's, but I had my duty as the limb of the law to preserve peace, so I shook my head no, regretful-like.

In a couple minutes Ellen came back with Windy's order. She put down his plate on the counter, and right off the newcomer grabbed hold of her hand.

"Miss Taylor, yore hand is white and purty like an angel's!" he busts out. He

was a violent lover, and he shore didn't lose no time gettin' started!

The situation might of embarrassed some girls, bein' as this locoed buckaroo was holdin' hands in the restrunt right before us all—but Ellen was of good-old-timer stock—she wasn't fazed. She stood there with a steamin' cup of coffee in her free hand, lookin' down at the puncher with calm blue eyes.

"What is yore name?" she asks.

"Henry Stevens, which my friends call me Windy," responds the buckaroo, plumb tickled at this show of interest.

She looked down at him like he was dirt. "Well, Mr. Stevens," she says, cold as ice, "will you remember yore manners and let go of my hand?"

Her tone would of caused most young punchers to run away and crawl in a hole somewheres. But Windy was absolutely not bashful. He grinned up at her, still holdin' her hand, and says, "Now wait, Miss—"

But Ellen didn't wait. Her blue eyes lit up and she tilted that cup of coffee in her other hand, and poured the steamin' liquid on Windy's head.

If words didn't have no effect on Windy, that hot coffee shore did. The young puncher let go of his hold with a surprised grunt, and spent the next couple minutes puffin', and sighin', and wipin' the coffee off his face and out of his eyes. When he was back to normal and the rest of us was able to stop laughin', Ellen was back out of sight in the kitchen again.

Windy looked at us grieved. "That is no way to treat a person!" he protests.

Angel snorted. "Young fellow, you got just what was comin' to you," he retorts, "and if Ellen hadn't done it, I was just goin' to do somethin' of the sort to show you not to annoy the female help in my restrunt."

"And I would of joined in, too, to teach you not to disturb the peace," I adds.

"While I would of got in a lick just fer general principles," finishes Lobo Jim.

Windy took all these rebukes meek-like, and ate his beans fer a while in sorrowful silence. Then he brightened up again, and looked at us. "Guess I was a bit rash," he admits, "but the main drawback is, I'm all rough-lookin' and dusty. Wait till tomorrow night! I'll shore put on my glad rags, and then there'll be a different story!" He laid his money on the lunch counter and walked out whistlin'.

This human phonograft went down to the hotel and put up fer the night. Next mornin' bright and early he was ridin' out of town. I figgered that was the last we'd ever see of him, and was some thankful fer the same.

But a bad penny is hard to get rid of. He took a notion real sudden to stay near Indianola. He got him a job ridin' fer the J-5 outfit, which was about ten miles southeast of town.

So the next evenin' Windy rode into Indianola again, slicked up fit to kill. He had on a shirt that was purple like a sunset, woolly chaps, a fancy vest and boots you could see yourself in. I seen him on the street as I was headin' fer the restrunt, and the sight near made me stagger.

"Windy," I says, "I ought to arrest you fer disturbin' the peace with them clothes. The sight of you is liable to strike all of Indianola blind."

Windy grinned as he dismounted. "These rags sort of knock your eye out, don't they?" he says satisfied-like. "Just watch me to-night. Ellen won't treat me so cold this time!"

"We'll see," I answers, and we went in the restrunt together.

Angel and Lobo Jim was there eatin', and they gave the young fellow a look like he was poison. "You back again?" growls the restrunt owner.

"Rejoice, boys! I am among you once more!" bleats Windy. He sat down at the counter and whistled a tune, accompanyin' himself by drummin' with his knife and fork.

Angel winked at me and drew his finger across his throat, the same meanin' that here was one hombre that ought to have his wind shut off permanent. But there was a grin on his face as he did it, and I had to grin, too, when I nodded back.

'Cause the fact was, you couldn't help

likin' Windy. He was as noisy and exasperatin' as a dozen calves, but at the same time he was full of nonsense and high spirits and good-humor, and so pleasant and friendly, that you couldn't dislike him. He wasn't a bad-lookin' jasper, with his gray eyes and brown hair and boyish smile, and you had to laugh at him in spite of yourself.

Well, in a few minutes, in came Ellen to take our orders, and if she was surprised or pleased to see Windy she sure didn't show it. She looked at him like he was a perfect stranger and says cool, "What is it, please?"

Windy was so flustered at this reception that he gave his order without any extra remarks. But when she came in again with the grub, he was primed and ready fer her.

He adjusted the silk handkerchief around his neck, and smiled at her.

"Miss Taylor, I think you're the purtiest girl I've ever seen," he busts out.

Ellen raised her eyebrows and looked at him. "You think so, do you?" she asks.

"I know so," he corrects himself. "You are the finest girl in the world, and I fell fer you the minute I saw you." He was not laughin' now, but his gray eyes was shinin', serious-like.

Ellen flushed—with pleasure, I suppose—and started to smile. This young puncher was sure a fast worker, and he laid it on thick when he paid a compliment. But then she must of thought of the audience, and love-makin' and sweet speeches in public didn't please her none.

Ellen frowned and banged down Windy's grub and coffee in front of him. Then she picked up her big tin tray and walked back toward the kitchen without a word.

"Say, wait!" cried Windy, excited. He jumped up from his stool and went around the counter. He acted just as if he and the girl was alone, and rest of us wasn't there.

"Wait!" he says. "I'm crazy about you, Ellen, and I'm goin' to kiss you."

She stopped in the doorway to the kitchen, and her blue eyes give him a look that ought to have chilled his blood. "Oh, you are, are you?" she asks, cold-like.

But Windy was not stopped. "Yes, I am!" he responds, grinnin', and went on toward her. She tossed her yellow bobbed hair at that, and went on into the kitchen, slammin' the door behind her.

Windy went right on after her, and the door closed behind him.

I got up with blood in my eye. "I'm goin' back and show that young upstart how to behave!" I announces.

Lobo Jim got up too. "I'm with you, Walrus," he says. "I'll show him how to act with a girl, if I got to break every bone in his head."

But Angel sits tight. "Don't get excited, boys," he soothes. "Windy means all right, he's just a trifle hasty. And anyway, Ellen can take care of herself. She don't need no help."

And the restrunt owner was right. The words was just out of his mouth when there was a loud clang from the kitchen, like somebody had hit a tin wash tub with a sledge hammer. The echo was still ringin' in the air when Windy busts out of the kitchen, holdin' his head, with a dazed look in his eyes. He came around the counter without sayin' a word, and flopped down on his stool.

"What was that loud noise I heard just now, Windy?" asks Angel, casual.

Windy rubbed his eyes, and then held his head again. He sighed. "Maybe that was the town clock strikin'."

"We ain't got a town clock," replies Angel, sober as a judge, "and if we did have one, it wouldn't strike. And if it would strike, it wouldn't of struck now, 'cause it's just twenty minutes after six."

"I must be wrong, then," says Windy. He shoved his plate of chow aside, and drank down his cup of scaldin' coffee like it was lukewarm. Then he got up, threw down his money, jammed his hat on his head, and rushed out.

When he was gone, Angel looked at us and grinned from ear to ear. "Pore fellow! He went back fer a kiss and all he got was a crack on the head! Well, the course of true love shore don't run smooth."

Ellen came in from the kitchen again, and we controlled our laughin'. The pretty waitress looked pale and sort of worried. She still had her tray, and it had a big dent in the middle that wasn't there before.

"What's happened to your tray, Ellen?" inquires Angel, innocent-like.

She looked at it and flushed. "I must have bent it settin' it down too hard," she replies. "Has—has Mr. Stevens gone?"

"He has," I responds.

There was sort of an anxious look in her eyes. "He's—all right, isn't he?" she asks.

"All right except fer an achin' head and hurt feelin's, and that won't do him no harm." He paused and looked at Ellen. "Did he—did he—"

"He did not!" replies Ellen, firm, her eyes flashin'. With that, she tossed her pretty blonde head again, and retired to the kitchen.

"Acts like she hates him worse'n poison," comments Lobo Jim.

"Don't be fooled too easy," drawls Angel. "Appearances are deceivin' some times." And he shook his head in a wise way, and went on devourin' his beans.

And when we were through and out in the street again, we looked around fer Windy. At last we seen him settin' on the steps of my general store, and the three of us went over to him.

Windy was settin' on the steps a-starin' down at the ground. He ran his fingers through his hair and scowled like somebody had fed him poison.

"You look sick, Windy," I comments as we drew near. "Maybe we ought to call a doctor."

"No use," adds Angel, "the pore boy has got an ailment that can't be cured by no doctor."

Windy raised his head, and gave us a look like he would like to eat us alive. "Will you do me a favor, and shut up?" he says. "And you can go to hell besides!"

"Yore manners are bad, which same you've demonstrated several times already," remarks Lobo Jim. "And anyway, don't jump on yore old friends this way. If you got to take yore spite out on somebody, pick on a stranger!"

We sat down beside him. But the puncher cussed to himself, got up and walked across the street and sat down on the rail of a hitchin'-rack. It was very evident that he was struck with love, and that he wanted to sit alone and think about his sorrow.

But he was not left undisturbed fer long. We had just lighted our pipes when there's a bronc come gallopin' down the street like mad, with the rider shootin' in the air and whoopin' like mad. He pulled to a stop in front of the store and dismounted.

He was a lean jasper with a cold black eye, and his hair long and tangled like he hadn't seen a barber or a comb fer weeks. "Whoopee!" yells this hombre. "I'm Panhandle Pete, and I'm goin' to wipe this town off the earth!"

He was likkered up considerable, and rarin' fer trouble. When such jaspers come to town, I generally put 'em in the cooler till they sober up and quiet down.

"Panhandle Pete, the jail's empty and waitin' fer you," I says to myself.

He reloaded his gun and jammed it in the holster. Then he started toward the store. I was just goin' to tell him to come along, when he happened to turn his head and catch sight of Windy across the street.

At that, the long-haired hombre let out a yell, and turned around and crossed the street to where Windy was settin'. He eyed the young puncher up and down, and then busted out in a laugh.

"Hey there, Purple Shirt!" he cries. "How come you're runnin' loose?"

Windy looked up absent-like, then looked down again without speakin'.

I got up and hitched up my gun-belt a trifle. "Guess I'll go over and arrest that long-haired jasper 'fore he causes trouble," I says.

But Angel grabbed my arm. "Wait a minute," he pleads. "Give Windy a chance to take care of himself. Let's just see if there is anything in the boy besides—wind!"

So we waited and watched. The long-haired fellow went a step closer toward Windy. "Look up there, damn you!"

Windy looked up again, and this time he didn't look dreamy-eyed. "You're talkin' to me, are you?" he asks crisp-like. "Well, I'm talkin' to you, too! I'm tellin' you to move on—pronto!"

It looked like in time of trouble Windy was not windy at all, but quite cool and quiet. But the long-haired trouble-hunter let out another yell. "Are you tryin' to get fresh, youngster?" he cries. "You get out of town, or I'll drill you! Savvy?" He rushed up to Windy and grabbed him by the arm, and commenced to pull him off his perch on the hitchin'-rack.

Windy's gray eyes lit up at that. He jumped down and shoved against the other fellow hard, at the same time trippin' him up. Panhandle Pete staggered back a dozen steps, and finally fell full length in the street.

He got up covered with dust and near frothin' at the mouth. I jumped up and ran out to interfere, but it was too late. Panhandle Pete was crazy mad. "I'll kill you, damn you!" he screams. With that he went fer his gun.

But Windy had a six-shooter too, and he proved that he didn't wear it fer no ornament. His right hand went down quick as a wink and came up full of hardware. Before the long-haired badman could pull down on Windy, the kid blazed away at him.

That one shot was all that was necessary. Panhandle Pete's gun went flyin' out of his hand, and the bad hombre stood starin' at his fingers, which was stingin' and bleedin' from Windy's bullet.

Windy looked at his opponent, and put his gun back in the holster. He sighed. "Ain't no place in this damn town where a man can think in peace!" he says aloud, half to himself. Then he turned his back on us and walked up the street.

Panhandle Pete stood lookin' at his retreatin' back fer a minute. Then all of a sudden there was murder in the badman's face, and he stooped to pick up his gun.

But I was pretty close by then, so I jumped in and knocked the long-haired hombre down and kicked his gun out of reach. "The cooler fer you, amigo," I says. "It ain't polite in Indianola to try and shoot people in the back."

I hustled him to his feet and took him over to the jail, bandaged his hand and locked him up. He swore and yelled so much that I couldn't stand it near him, so I went back over to the store, which was out of earshot.

"Are you satisfied now?" I asks Angel when I got there.

He grinned. "I am," he replies. "Windy ain't lackin' in nerve. He's a real man, even if he does talk too much."

And that was the verdict. But even if Windy was a real man, he was shore a sad one next day. He went around town with a face as long as a fiddle. Finally he came in my store, and asked me fer my help and fatherly advice.

"Fire away," I says.

"I acted like a locoed fool with Ellen yesterday," he says shame-faced. "Now I want to apologize to her. How'll I go about it, Walrus?"

"You set down and write her a note," I answers, "and I'll take it over to her for yuh."

So he sat down on a box and tried to write, and after spendin' two hours sighin' and scratchin' his head and wastin' my paper and ink, at last he was done. He showed the letter to me. It was no liter'y masterpiece, and had one misspelled word in it, but it was humble and straight forward and pleadin', and no girl could help but feel pleased at gettin' such a note.

"This ought to turn the trick and set things right with her again," I comments, "and now I'll take it over to Ellen."

So I went over to the restrunt and gave Ellen his note of apology, at the same time puttin' in a good word fer him myself. "He's a wild an' crazy young fellow, but he means well," I explains to her. "I think you ought to make up with him."

Ellen breathed faster when she read that note, and her blue eyes was shinin'.

"Why, it's all right, of course," she

says. "Tell Windy I — I'm somewhat sorry about last night myself, for—"

"There's one thing still puzzles me," I interrupts, smooth-like. "Did you hit him square on top of the head with that tray, or on the temple?"

"On top—" she begins, and then stops sudden, flushin'. "You're always askin' questions, Walrus," she says half poutin' her pretty red lips at me. "Go along, now!"

So I winked at her and returned to the store. Windy was pacin' back and forth, and lookin' wild and anxious, like a locoed steer in a cage. When I came in he grabbed me by the arm.

"Quick!" he cries. "What did she say?"

"She says all is off between you and her," I replies solemn. "You've insulted her, and she never wants to see you again."

Windy let out a dull groan like a dyin' sheep, dropped down on a basket of cabbages, and buried his face in his arms.

That boy shore must have been hard hit! I felt sort of sorry fer tellin' him a fib and makin' him suffer. Also, he was settin' despondent on my cabbages and damagin' the same considerable.

So I went over behind the counter and then sung out to him. "Windy, I've told you a lie," I says. Then I mentions the true facts, that she says everything was fergiven.

Windy jumped up with a whoop, like somebody had stuck spurs in him.

"You old fossil!" he cried, and throws a head of cabbage at me. But I was expectin' somethin', so I dodged behind the counter.

Windy was almost to the door. "Stop in the name of the law!" I yells.

Windy stopped and looked at me.

"You owe me fer a head of cabbage," I says. "But that ain't all I got to tell you. Take my advice when you go to see Ellen. Fer Pete's sake hold a check-rein on yore tongue! And also, don't be fresh. A little liveliness and conversashun is a fine thing, but too much of the same makes people long fer a lynchin'."

Windy smoothed his hair. "I guess you are right, Walrus," he replies slow. Then he went out.

Bein' left alone, it struck me that I had somethin' to do yet, and after a minute I figgered out what it was. I still had Panhandle Pete, the drunken badman, on my hands, or rather in my jail. So I went down to take a look at him.

The would-be terror of the range had sobered up by now. He was sullen and quiet, glarin' through the bars of his cell like he'd like to eat me. With his long, tangled hair and brutal stubby face and black scowl, he was shore a sight to scare children with.

I dressed his hand, even though it wasn't hurt more'n a scratch. Then I unlocked the cell door and told him to get. "Yore kind ain't wanted in Indianola, so slope on out of town and stay out," I advises.

Panhandle Pete's eyes got mean, and he showed his teeth. "I'll get, but I'll be back!" he growls. "I've got some pals up in the hills, and I don't take nothin' from nobody without makin' 'em pay fer it! You and that damn cowpuncher'll wish you never monkeyed with me!"

I was not impressed by this oration, but told the bad hombre to leave pronto if he didn't want a week more in jail. At this Panhandle Pete cooled down some, went out quiet and got his horse, then sloped out of town without delay. I figgered we was rid of a danged bad citizen, and felt some relieved.

As fer Windy, he must have follered my advice about his talk and conduct. Anyway, his makin' up with Ellen was grand and complete. In fact, they was soon showin' all the symptoms of bein' in love. Windy was in town at Angel Hooker's restrunt all the time he could spare. He was ridin' fer the J-5, but as soon as the day's work was done he'd rush to town to see Ellen.

And Ellen was no longer cold to him like she'd been at first. When he came in, a flush would rise on her cheeks, and her blue eyes'd sparkle like stars. It shore looked like the young waitress had somebody's brand on her heart at last.

Windy acted like a changed man at

times. He'd set silent by the hour, starin' into space, and I'd think he was reformin' from his wind-jammin' at last. Then again he'd bust out in a spell of talk that'd strike the bystanders dumb and leave 'em gaspin'.

"Purty soon there will be a weddin' in this town, and then a certain wind-bag will have a wife to jabber at, and make her life miserable," says Angel one night.

Windy grinned and looked dreamy-eyed. "Boys, everything is goin' fine, and I'm hopin' fer the best," he responds.

But Angel shook his head discouragin'. "Don't be too sure. You'll be goin' along slick as a whistle, and then the side of a house'll fall in on yuh. The course of true love is chuck full of disasters and grief, and never runs smooth," says the restrunt proprietor in a tone like a undertaker.

Windy laughed at him, and Angel grinned too, 'cause he'd just meant it fer a joke. But he'd prophesied pretty close to the truth and trouble came to Indianola sudden, lookin' fer Windy. It came in the person of—but I'm gettin' ahead of my story.

One mornin' I received a card through the mail. It was a notice to all the deputies and officers, and at the bottom it says, "This man wanted fer murder and mail robbery. Five hundred dollars' reward fer his capture, dead or alive." And at the top was a unmistakable picture of the long-haired hombre—Panhandle Pete!

I shore regretted havin' had this valuable jail-bird in my cage and then turnin' him loose. I mentioned the same to Windy, and he looked interested. "Five hundred dollars!" he says astonished. "Why, with that I could 'a' made first payment on a little outfit up north and gone to ranchin'!"

"Well, he's gone now. We've had our chance and let it slip," I responds. "He didn't look like he was worth much, but you can't always tell."

So that was that. But the next evenin', when us old timers gathered in the restrunt fer supper, we seen that somethin' had happened. The glad look on Ellen's face, and the light in Windy's eyes told us that. Then we looked further and found the answer. There was a diamond ring on the third finger of Ellen's left hand.

The diamond was small, 'cause Windy's finances wasn't strong. But it was an engagement ring, sure as shootin'.

After congratulations had been circulated around by all concerned, we came up to look at the diamond. Ellen tried to get the ring off her finger, but it stuck tight.

"Windy bought it too tight fer me," she says. "Now if we break our engagement he'll have a hard time gettin' his ring back," she adds, smilin' at him.

He smiled back. "If we break our engagement, then yearlin's will be singin' in the tree-tops like song-birds," he responds.

And just then trouble came in on us. Three masked men came in, two by the front door and one by the side. They pointed their guns at us. "Put 'em up!" cries one.

We was took plumb off our guard, and there was no time to reach fer a six-shooter. Our hands went up in the air.

"Take their guns, Bill," orders the leader in a rough voice. Somehow I'd heard that voice before. I looked close at the hombre, but his whole face was covered with a mask.

Meantime the other bandit came around and relieved each of us of our gun-belts. I was plumb pained to feel the comfortin' weight of a Colt .45 bein' removed from my hip, but there wasn't nothin' I could do about it. The guns of them three bandits were pointed straight at our heads.

When we were all disarmed, and the gun-belts throwed in a corner, the leader spoke again. "Now clean them out, Joe. I've got a private matter to tend to." So one of the hold-up gents stood guard, another started to relieve us of our belongin's, and the leader walked up close to Windy Stevens and looked him in the eye.

"Know me, puncher?" he cries.

"Can't say as I do, friend," responds Windy cheerful. "Yore voice sounds sort of familiar, but—"

The masked leader let out a snarl. "Look at me, then!" he says, jerkin' off his mask. And it was nobody else but our old friend, Panhandle Pete!

I sighed at the idea of a gent worth five hundred dollars havin' the drop on me. If I only had the drop on him, now!

"Know me now, don't yuh?" snarls Panhandle, showin' his teeth like a wolf. "Well, what you got to say?"

Windy just grinned. "I recall yuh now, shore enough," he drawls. "But under the circumstances, I can't say that I'm pleased to meet yuh!"

The badman narrowed his hard eyes, and gripped his gun tighter. "I guess you ain't," he sneers. "You shot me up a while ago, and now I've come back—to kill yuh!"

At that, all of us gave a start, and Ellen put her hand to her mouth and let out a half-choked scream. But Windy was cool.

"Give me a gun and we'll shoot it out to a finish," he suggests, quiet.

Then Panhandle threw back his head and laughed. "Give you a gun!" he cries. "I will—like hell! I'll give you a bullet in the stomach! Damn you, you made a fool outa me, and now I'm goin' to kill yuh like a coyote!"

I half lowered my hands at that. That long-haired cold-blooded killer made my blood boil. But the other hombre swung his Colt toward my stomach quick and business-like, so there wasn't nothin' to do but raise my hands again.

At this time the second bandit took Angel's wallet and moved on toward the counter. Ellen shrank away from him, but he reached over and grabbed her by the wrist. "Let's see that ring!" he says.

She tried to pull away, but he was too strong. He held her wrist with one hand while he jerked at the ring with the other. But it was tight on her finger, and would not budge.

The hombre swore, and twisted and wrenched at the ring. Ellen's face turned white, and she gasped with pain, but still the ring didn't come.

Windy's jaw stuck out, and he was tremblin' like a hound on a leash. I was just about to rush the dirty rascal myself, guns or no guns, when Panhandle raised his hand.

"Let the girl alone fer a minute," he says. "We'll get the ring if we got to cut her finger off. But first I want to finish this fellow," and he pointed at Windy.

Then his eyes got hard and the bloodlust shone in them, and he held his gun to Windy's head. "It's time to finish this business," he growls. "Got anything to say 'fore I bump you off?"

We was all sick at heart for the poor boy, about to be shot down without a show fer his life by that dirty killer. But Windy wasn't disturbed none by the prospect. He nodded calm. "Shore," he responds. "Just you give me a few minutes and I'll prove to you why you oughtn't to shoot me. To do that we better begin at the beginnin' and go all the way back to my birthday," he continues, cuttin' off Panhandle's objections. "I was born January 14, 1903, near the town of Two Forks," he goes on. He started walkin' back and forth, wavin' his hands and carryin' on like a regular orator. "On the night before I was born there was a snow slide come down from the hills, and a pack of wolves howled through the streets of the town all night long. All the old-timers of the town says these were signs that a great man was to be born, and they was shore right. Now—"

Panhandle had been standin' by with his gun half lowered and his mouth open. Now he swore and raised his gun again. "Cut this damned foolery!" he shouts. "If you got any last words to say, then say 'em pronto!"

Windy paused and looked pained. "I'm sayin' 'em, ain't I?" he asks. "Just wait a minute, and I'll get to the point, and prove why you oughtn't shoot me."

"So when I was five days old—" he continues, and Panhandle lowers his gun again, and the hombre that held Ellen's wrist let her go, and the third bandit listened likewise. All of us listened.

And fer some minutes Windy paced back and forth and gestured and orated, throwin' a great and unceasin' flood of talk at our ears. He told us the most outlandish and insane stuff—about how he played with bear cubs as a child, and was soon able to read the deepest books without turnin' a hair, and so on. And always he was pacin' back and forth, comin' nearer and nearer to the wall at each turn.

And then finally I seen what Windy was drivin' at. An old coat hung on a hook on the wall, and hangin' under the coat, half hid by it, was Angel's six-gun in its holster. The restrunt owner didn't generally wear his hardware, and kept it wherever it was handy.

And Windy, with his girl in danger and death starin' him in the face, was spoutin' off fer dear life, and edgin' closer and closer to the gun.

If the puncher got his hands on that gun, he'd have a fightin' chance. And the whole thing depended on whether he could hold the attention of them three numbskull bandits with his meanin'less and endless flow of words, while he edged nearer to that hook on the wall! It fair took my breath away.

But Windy didn't seem worried a bit. He was as pert as a sand piper, and grinned as he told 'em more nonsense about the doin's of his early youth. How he ever made up all that rot right on the run I don't know, but he did it. He was recitin' what he called the story of his life with all kinds of embroidery and details, and after some minutes the story reached the point where he was sixteen years old. And he was within ten feet of that gun on the wall.

Then one of the other bandits busts out. "Hell, Panhandle, can't yuh see he's just makin' a fool of yuh?" he asks sarcastic. "He's just spinnin' these long-winded lies and stallin'. Plug him pronto."

Panhandle Pete came out of his trance. He looked ugly, and raised his gun again toward Windy's head. His finger was already tightenin' on the trigger, and Ellen moaned and the rest of us caught our breaths.

Then Windy raised his hand like a general commandin' his troops. "Just one second," he says. "I'll cut the story short and show yuh the point of it, why yuh shouldn't shoot me."

With these words he gave a jump toward the wall, and his fingers closed on the butt of Angel's gun hangin' there. He jerked it out of the holster like lightnin', and threw himself on the floor. As he dropped, Panhandle's gun roared and dust flew from the old coat on the hook where the bullet struck.

Bein' unarmed and in the firin' zone I dropped to the floor, and the rest of the old-timers did the same. Ellen dodged down behind the counter and was safe fer the time bein'. I was neither safe ner comfortable, but, bein' right close, I could see all the details of that scrap.

Even as Windy was droppin' toward the floor, he drew a bead on Panhandle and fired. The bullet took the outlaw leader in the shoulder, and he howled and went over backward, and he was out of the fight.

Quick as a flash Windy was on his feet again, crouchin' low. He swung around on the second outlaw near the wall. This hombre was so flustered by the sudden events that he fired wild, and his bullet went in the floor. Then Windy blazed away and drilled him in the arm, and there was two of the bandits accounted for.

The third hombre, standin' by the counter near me, had a cooler head. He drew a careful steady bead on Windy, and before the puncher could turn to face him he was squeezin' the trigger.

I figgered it was time to get in on the rumpus. Bein' within arm's length I reached out from where I laid and grabbed the bandit by the leg.

The jerk I gave him sort of spoiled his aim. His gun went off pointin' at the ceilin', and before he could recover himself Windy was on him, leapin' in like a wildcat.

The puncher swung his fist and landed on the bandit's jaw, and the masked hombre went down cold without a groan.

The fight was over. Everything was quiet again. I got up, and the rest did

likewise, sort of sheepish. "That's that," I comments.

"That's that," replies Windy with a grin. Then of a sudden his face got tender, and he put away his gun and rushed to the counter. Ellen was standin' there, pale and shaky, her blue eyes wide.

Windy didn't say a word. He just went around the counter and grabbed her in his arms, and held her tight. They stood there that way and fergot about everything but each other.

Meanwhile the gent with the shot-up arm was makin' an effort to pick up his gun with his left hand. Seein' that Windy had sort of lost interest after his big fight and had turned all his attentions to Ellen, I took charge of things.

I stepped forward and kicked the gun away from the bandit's gropin' fingers. Then Angel and Lobo Jim and I each took one of the outlaws in charge and led 'em away toward jail. None of 'em was hurt bad, but they was all sweatin' shockin', and we wanted to hustle 'em out of Ellen's hearin'.

But Ellen and Windy was still absorbed in each other and the roof could of fell in without them noticin' it. At the door I stopped, put my hand over Panhandle Pete's mouth to check his flow of cussin', and turned to Windy. "Hey there!" I yells.

Windy lifted his face from Ellen's yellow hair, blinkin' like he was comin' out of a trance.

"I just want to inform you that you got five hundred dollars' reward comin'," I says. "Your windiness brought some profit in this evenin'. Now we'll take these prisoners to jail and have 'em doctored up, if you'll excuse us."

"You're excused," says Windy with a grin. "And now I'll be able to buy that ranch up north! Now won't you say that my gift of gab's a good thing? It saved my life, and Ellen's ring, and made me five hundred dollars this evenin'. But that was an awful job makin' up my life story on the run, and keepin' yore little playmate from blazin' away!" And at that the puncher shook his head.

I was afraid Windy would bust into another oration again, so I moved on. "If this hombre hadn't been such a dumb one you wouldn't of got by with yore stall," I flings over my shoulders as I drags Panhandle away.

But Windy didn't answer. He was lookin' into Ellen's blue eyes, with a wild happy look on his face. And Windy was not windy then.

But he can't be cured fer good. He's liable to bust out any time and talk an arm off of yuh. When I, bein' Justice of the Peace, married the two of them he cut loose.

"Do you take this woman to be yore lawful wedded wife?" I inquires solemn-like durin' the course of the marriage ceremony.

Windy wasn't satisfied to give the proper answer. He wanted to make a speech while he was at it. "*Do* I?" he cried. "Why ain't she the finest, prettiest, sweetest girl in the world? Ain't she the dandiest girl a man could find anywhere? Why, just look at her eyes, her lips, her hair! Why—" He paused and pressed her hand. Ellen was bitin' her lips and tryin' to shut him up, but he was lookin' at her dreamy-like.

I fergot the dignity of the occasion and busts out, "You bellowin' steer, will you answer my question?"

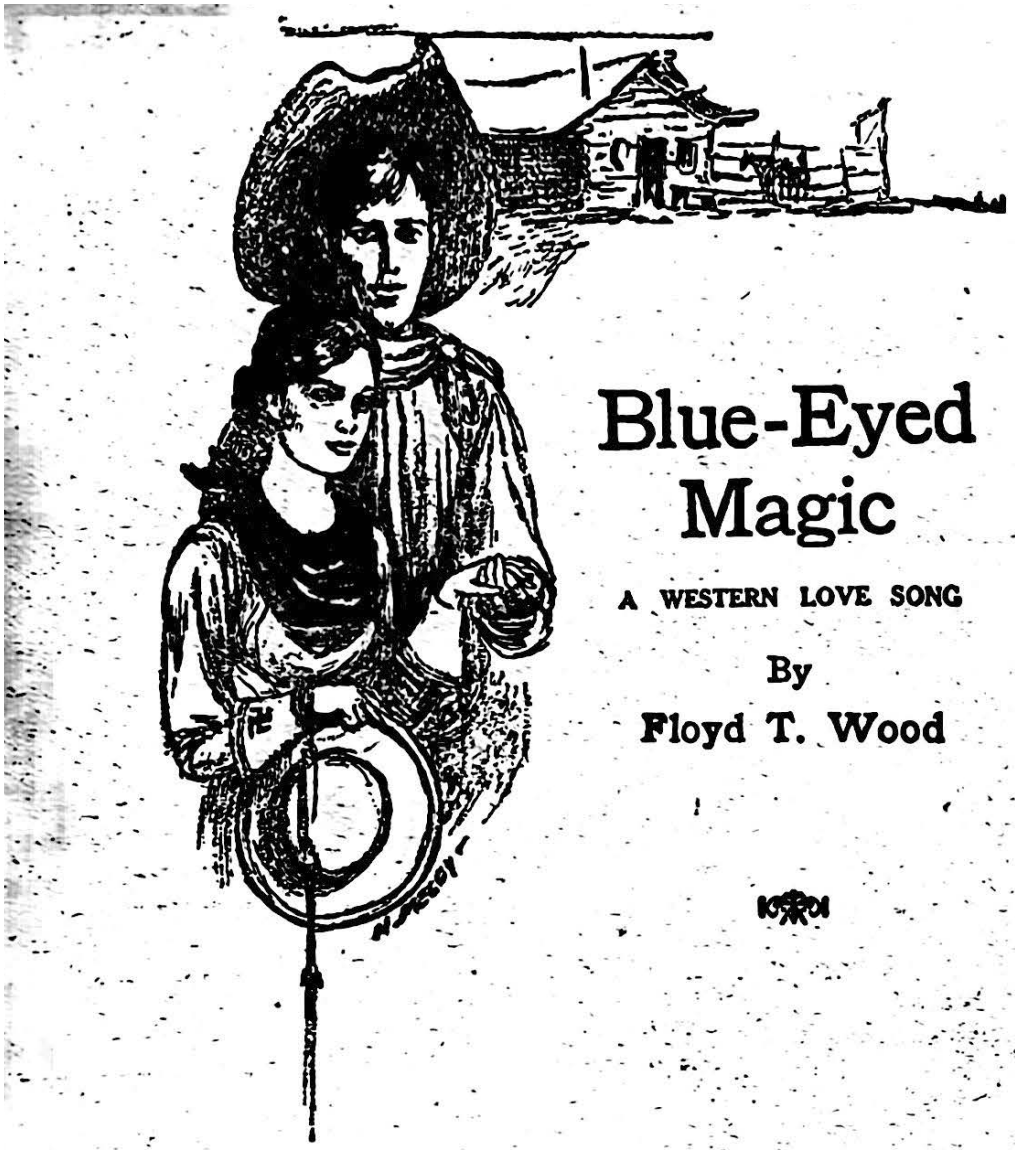
So Windy become meek and mild, and answers quiet, "I do."

Then I turned to Ellen. "Now here's the windiest, most talkative piece of nothin' west of the Mississippi," I says solemn to her. "He ain't worth yore second look, but I guess he loves yuh. Do you take him to be yore lawful wedded husband?" There was a twinkle in my eye while I spoke.

And there was a twinkle in Ellen's eyes as she looked at me. Then her glance shifted to Windy, and her look changed. Her face got sort of tender, and her lips parted, and her wide blue eyes lit up like stars. And Windy looked back at her, with the same sort of a rapt look on his face.

Ellen's voice was low, and sort of husky. "I do," she says.

So that was that.



Blue-Eyed Magic

A WESTERN LOVE SONG

By

Floyd T. Wood

USTER brag a heap I'd never
Fall fer love an' such;
Uster say—an' think I meant it—
Gals don't count fer much.
Uster like the friendly welcome
From the bunkhouse door;
Uster once, but things is different,
Don't do that no more.

USTER think I'd never hanker
Fer a little shack;
Didn't want no wife ner kiddies
Fer to hold me back;
Always sneered at love an' lovin',
Said 'twuz silly stuff;
Lately I been kinda hedgin'—
Cupid called my bluff.

USTER once, but, well, I'm finished
Done with roamin' free;
Blue-eyed gal she got me cornered;
Slapped her brand on me.
Glad she done it now I've tumbled
All I been a-missin';
Jest found out how lips wuz made
'Specially fer kissin'!

TAKIN' huggin' lessons now'days—
Gee, the sweetest feelin'—
All them years I wasted, too,
Gals are sure appealin'!
Bachin' life's all right fer nitwits
Wearin' ivory domes,
But sweethearts sure kin throw a loop
On happiness an' homes!

Love Claims

By

William Freeman Hough

A shot from a cannon, and the race was on. And what a race! If ever the rolling prairie saw a locoed stampede of land grabbers, badmen, lovers and plainsmen, that was it—and then some!

"IT'S *no* place for a girl, Nellie. All the bad hombres in the country'll be in that race, an' there ain't half enough soldiers here tuh hold 'em in check."

"Perhaps not, but just the same—" The curved lips of the girl standing near the corral lifted in a slight smile. "I can ride just as fast as any of them, and I don't see why I shouldn't stake out a homestead too."

Ren Buford remained serious. "But we don't need two. The boss has promised to let me fix up the shack by the well and we can settle down there in fine shape."

"I don't see why he shouldn't let you fix it up; you're going to stake out that quarter section, aren't you?"

"Yeah; but it's his shack an' his well. He could of moved one an' spoiled the other if he hadn't wanted tuh keep 'em for his range. There's five of us boys that's goin' tuh grab quarter sections of the land he's had under lease, an' in that way we can save part of the range for the Flying T. O' course we'll have tuh work part of the land with a plow or somethin', but most of it'll be saved."

"I don't see what there is about the land opening to draw all these badmen you speak of; they're not homesteaders."

"It's the idee of gettin' somethin' for nothin'; an' then they can sell out a little later tuh some poor sucker who didn't make the grade in time. An' they won't stop at nothin' tuh pick the best sections, either; there'll be more'n one fight, yuh can bet on that."

"But if I ride Goldie, who's going to beat me?"

Ren fumbled with the bridle of the wiry roan horse that stood with head resting on his shoulder. There was no question as to Goldie's speed nor Nellie Wilson's riding ability, and yet he could picture them in that mad rush for land, the wild race in which there were no favors shown; a well timed collision or a furtive shot from the hip of some scheming rider and she would be down, crushed or set afoot before an avalanche of crazed land-seekers.

"Nellie," he said at last, "I sure do love you, an' I ain't the one tuh ask anything unreasonable of yuh, but just the same I wish yuh wouldn't join in the race."

"I've promised to marry you, Ren, but that's all I have promised. I'll think it over and if I believe that a woman shouldn't try for a land stake, I'll stay right here at home and pray for your good luck, Now, you'll be careful, won't you?" She reached up and tied a fresh knot in his gaudy neckerchief.

"Just as careful as I know how." He seized one of the fingers at his throat and bit it playfully. "Now, I got tuh be goin'; the boys are prob'ly waitin' for me. See yuh later, girl."

She watched him until the gathering dusk swallowed the graceful lift of his figure, then she walked to the barn and put down a fresh feed of hay for Goldie, a beautiful chestnut gelding. She patted his arched neck, ran fingers down his slim, racy legs, whispered something in his pointed ears and then returned to the house.

When Ren Buford trotted into Melville, he found the small town alive with light and action. For those brief hours before dawn, the usually quiet little town would be a turmoil, a seething caldron of excitement. The streets were filled with every type of human known to the West. Most of them were there for the purpose of trying their luck at a choice bit of land, others were there for other purposes, and it was these that the handful of regular soldiers tried to watch.

Ren halted before the Midway Hotel, and, dropping rein over the scarred hitch-rail, strode into the small lobby in search of Jim Evart and the boys of the Flying T. They were to meet there for final advice and instructions, for Jim Evart was going to make an attempt to save part of his range by having his men all stake out quarter sections.

The cowboy glanced hastily about and, not seeing his friends, he approached the desk. The dog-eared register showed that Jim had taken a room, and the clerk informed him that Jim and the rest of the boys were in it. Near the bottom step of the hotel stairway was a rickety chair, and in it a thin, white-haired man sat. Kneeling by him was a girl, her face worried and white. She had taken her coat and bundled it into a pillow for the old man to rest a freshly splinted arm on. There was something extremely pathetic about the pair, and Ren paused.

"Need some help to get him to the room?" he asked.

She shook her head. "There are no rooms left. I'm trying to make him comfortable in this chair. He just broke his arm this morning."

"That's hard luck. Here for the land opening?"

"Yes; we're making a final stab for a home." She attempted a smile, and the cowboy instantly classified her as game. Also, there was a meaning behind her statement. It would be tough business for them on the morrow.

He went on up the stairs and opened a door. The room was clouded with smoke, and through the haze the voice of Jim Evart came belligerently.

"So I knew when the agent refused to renew my lease that somethin' was up; this is it. There'll be a thousan' squatters squattin' by sun-down tuh-morrow; an' where'll our range be? Now, you boys take another good look at this map. I know yuh savvy our shacks an' wells, but there's section lines yuh got tuh know about so's yuh won't file on the wrong corners."

Ren joined them and gazed down at the map. The thing was quartered up for many square miles. Some of it was on the flat prairie and some of it edged back

into the hills. The hill part was very poor for a squatter's needs, but it was certain that some of them would have to take it. Near the edge of the opened section, Jim had marked the spots that had been under his lease and which he had developed for water. He knew that he no longer had any rights to his wells or shacks, unless his men could win in the land rush and stake out the pieces under their own names.

"Pat, you grab the quarter where Gangrene Creek cuts in; Jeff, you fan out tuh the Dogwood shack; Slim, you get a stake on the swamp quarter, and Mort an' Ren, you cover the south well an' the two shacks there. Yuh can see by the map that those two quarters wedge in side by side. That'll put two of yuh tuhgether in case there's a fight. An' don't forget yuh'll have tuh ride like hell 'cause the well an' the shacks are on the first edge of the land. An' look out for Mud Eye Ferguson and his gang. I happen tuh know that they're aimin' tuh cop the best parts."

"The soldiers are goin' tuh have their hands full in the mornin'," predicted one.

"Yeah; there'll be some that'll want tuh jump the gun. O' course if they do, it'll spoil the race, 'cause no claim will be recognized where the party beat the gun. Just the same, if some of 'em get goin', you fellahs beat it too; we won't take no chances on a fluke. Now, take care of your broncs an' hit the hay. Ren, your room is down the hall. I fixed it up so's you an' Mort would bunk tuhgether, seein' as how yuh'll ride tuhgether in the mornin'."

When Ren discovered that a room had been reserved for him and Mort, he immediately began plans that he was sure would meet with his partner's approval. He called Mort to one side and explained the situation down-stairs. "The ol' fella looks all in, Mort, an' the girl's as white as a sheet. I know they're squatters, or want tuh be, but also they're humans, an' neither one is strong an' husky like you an' me. What say?"

"Come on," said the other Flying T rider, "let's carry him up."

In fifteen minutes they had deposited the old man and his daughter in the only room available in Melville, and they departed with the girl's tearful thanks in their ears. They must now find a spot in some livery barn or hay-mow to spend the night, and this was no easy task.

"Who is this Mud Eye Ferguson the boss was talkin' about?" asked Mort as the pair settled down on a pile of hay above a row of horse stalls.

"He's a gambler an' general badman from down the border way. He was in on the Muckleshoot Reservation opening an' grabbed a lot of the best land there. He sold it two weeks later an' cleaned up big. I s'pose that's what he plans tuh do here, an' he's the hombre you an' me has got tuh beat tuh-morrow. Got your gun all oiled up?"

"The ol' cannon is yawnin' tuh go, Ren. What does Nellie think of this thing?"

"Oh, she wants me tuh be careful."

"I ain't askin' what she wants you tu do, I'm inquirin' about the land openin'."

"Hump! She's half a mind tuh join in. That Goldie hoss o' her'n can run the legs off'n anything in these woods. I don't want her to, but yuh know—Hey! Quit gougin' me with your spurs."

"Spurs? Why, yuh son of a gun, I ain't got 'em on. A gentleman never wears spurs tuh bed."

"Then what the—oh, it's Roany, nippin' at muh leg through the boards." He sat up and snapped a finger at his horse's nose as it shoved up through a wide crack in the loft floor. "We're disturbin' his sleep, Mort."

"Hump!" skeptically. "If a little thing like that'll bother 'im, what'll he do tuh-morrow mornin' when the gang lines up for the start? My gosh, Ren, yuh ought tuh see the contraptions some o' these folks is aimin' tuh ride. You didn't get intuh town early enough tuh look 'em over, I guess. Why, they's even a couple of them automobeels, an' I saw one of them things that sputters so; what you call 'em—motocycles, or some such name? Anyhow, a kid rode one intuh town tuh-day with a bathtub on a spare wheel hooked alongside. Now, when that thing

gets tuh stewin' aroun', some of us hombres on broncs is goin' places which we ain't no wise planned for."

"I seen one of 'em onct. They ought tuh be ruled outa the race. Still, they ain't much tuh be afraid of; they ain't a bronc alive what can't beat 'em in a ten mile race like tuh-morrow. An' that ain't a bathtub hooked ontuh it; it's a side car."

Eventually the pair slept, nor did they awaken until the heavy boot of the livery man, as he shoved down hay to the horses below, roused them. The first gray streaks of dawn were sifting in through the cracks in the barn roof. Except for the champing of many horses below them, there was deep silence. No sound reached them from the street, and Ren leaped to his feet with an exclamation.

"Mort, we've over-slept; the race is on!" He grabbed for his friend's hair and hoisted him to his feet.

"Let loose muh hair, yuh idot, afore I wrap this gun butt aroun' your nose. Can't yuh hear them hosses eatin'? They wouldn't be here if the race started. Naw; we're just up early, that's all, which same is lucky for us. We gets some breakfast now."

"Lord!" breathed Ren in relief. "I was plumb scairt for a minute. What'd Nellie say if I slipped up on the land grab?"

"She couldn't talk no faster'n that boss of ours. Come on, let's eat."

The men appeared on the street in the first and only quiet hour in Melville since news of the land opening had spread. After some difficulty they roused the owner of a small restaurant and procured breakfast, then they returned to the livery barn to make last preparations for a history-making race. An hour and a half later they were but two in a line of several hundreds who waited impatiently for the small army cannon to explode. Several soldiers rode up and down the line to see that none crossed the mark before the proper time.

It was an odd yet fascinating sight. Eager, desperate, and some times sullen faces strained northward to where the goal lay. Their modes of travel were varied; horses, buckboards, wagons, two dilapidated automobiles, and, near to the end of the line, the bright red motorcycle with its supply-filled side car. Near where Red and Mort were waiting stood a light buckboard to which was hitched a fair looking team of bays. In the seat was the girl of the hotel, her lips set grimly. There was an air of do-or-die about her as she braced her feet against the dashboard and waited for the signal.

"How's your pa this mornin', ma'am?" asked Mort, edging closer.

A smile of recognition lightened her grim look. "He's better, I think. He slept very well, thanks to you, and insisted on coming along this morning; but I couldn't think of it. A man with a broken arm has no business in a race of this kind."

"None whatever," agreed Mort. "Have yuh any particular section in mind?"

"No; I'm just going to get the best I can. I don't know this country very well."

Mort glanced cautiously about him. All seemed to have their attention drawn elsewhere, so he climbed up over the buckboard wheel and placed his mouth close to her ear. "Go a little northeast," he whispered, "edge off tuh the right, until yuh see a clump o' willows. There's three quarters come tuhgether right there, an' it's good land. My friend an' me will have two of 'em, you hustle along an' grab the other."

"Oh, thank you, but—" At that moment a roar shook the universe, the army cannon had exploded and the race was on. The girl's team leaped forward with the rest, and Mort's lips, so close to her face, found a brief but firm resting place against her cheek. Rather dazed, he flung clear of the wheels, hit the ground with his feet and bounded into the saddle. Like the breaking of a huge dam, the flood of land-seekers spread out over the prairie in a bounding wave. There were several distinct crashes as wheels locked together and teams piled up. Fully a dozen outfits were out of the race in the first half a mile.

Ren and Mort set spurs to their mounts

and streaked away toward their chosen goal. The girl in the buckboard marked their course and sped after them. After the first mile, the two riders observed that there were several other horsemen headed their way. They had cut in from the west, and Ren suspected instantly that they had never started at the line. When they were but a quarter of a mile away, a red, careening vehicle, which spouted sharp jabs of flame, headed them off. The rider of the motorcycle was leaning over the bars and attempting to miss the various chuck holes and knolls with which the prairie was dotted.

"Look at 'im!" yelled Ren over his shoulder. "He's got them line sneaker's broncs plumb wild!" And this was a fact. The sight of the roaring machine had thrown the racing broncs into confusion.

"Gives us that much more lead on 'em," said Mort.

"Yeah; but what's that hombre on the snort-cart goin' tuh do? He may be headed for our place. An' gosh, look at 'im go. I didn't think one o' those things could—ug!" The sentence finished in a grunt as his shoulders struck the earth with a sharp thud. Near him his horse kicked spasmodically twice, then lay still.

"Badger hole?" called Mort, who had pulled up short and swung about.

"No hole about it," said Ren gaining his feet. "He just went down all of a sudden. Look! He's dead!"

A swift examination of the wiry roan disclosed a blue-black hole just back of the left shoulder. "Shot!" exclaimed Ren bitterly. He spun around to see the pursuing riders bend off to the left. "It's them, Mort. Must be Mud Eye Ferguson's gang. For gosh sakes, hurry an' get tuh the shack or we'll lose it."

"Hop up behind," commanded Mort. "There's two claims there an' we got tuh have 'em. This bronc o' mine is good for double ridin' onct. Get out your rifle an' see what yuh can do with it if we get close enough."

Ren pulled his rifle from beneath the down horse and sprang on behind Mort. There was a savage feeling coming over him—they had shot the best horse he'd ever owned. He pumped a shell into the rifle and peered over Mort's shoulder. Mort's horse was a big, raw-boned white; strong and willing; it was well that he was, for the pace was killing. Driven by the cowboy's churning heels, he flattened out and carried the double burden over the ground at a surprising speed.

They were almost close enough to try a shot, when, suddenly dipping over a knoll, they came upon a sight that caught them both unprepared for the horse's wild lunge to the side. Ren and Mort untangled themselves and sat up. The white horse, with empty stirrups flapping, was headed back for town at a speed exceeding anything he had ever done previous. The thing that had brought about their unseating and apparent ruin was popping merrily away with its rear wheel reared up in the air. The front wheel was buried in a hole and the rider was an unconscious heap some twenty feet ahead.

"Well, I'll be teetotally an' forever damned!" exclaimed Mort, rubbing a skinned elbow. "Now what?"

"It'll be an awful long walk," said Ren, spitting out a mouthful of short grass he'd scooped up.

"Walk! Huh, what's the use o' walkin'? We're too late now by a million miles." He groaned. "There goes our homesteads. Who ever said we could ride, anyhow?"

Ren got to his feet. "I wonder if this devil cart rider is dead?" He limped forward to where the boy lay. A brief examination proved that he was merely stunned by his hard fall. "I wonder—?" he said, and glanced at the spinning motorcycle wheel.

"Me too," said Mort advancing timidly. "The thing is faster'n hell, boy—if yuh thought you could run it—"

A rattle of wheels behind them drew their attention. The girl of the hotel sped past in her buckboard. She slackened as she saw their plight, but Mort waved for her to go on, and soon she was plying her whip again. "Some girl!" he said admiringly.

"She's game," admitted Ren. "Lord, I wish Nellie was in this race now. That

Goldie o' hers can beat anything in the field. What'll she say when she finds out —Hey!" But his warning came too late. Mort had advanced to the spinning rear wheel of the cycle and, reasoning that it must be stopped before the machine could be righted, had grasped it firmly with both hands. His body described a beautiful arc and landed some distance ahead.

"Yuh hurt, Mort?" Ren hurried to him.

"Ow; muh arms feel like they'd been pulled out by the roots. If brains was eggs, I wouldn't have 'nough tuh make a omlet for a gopher. Tryin' tuh stop that thing with muh hands—"

"Yuh stopped it all right; it kinda sputtered, then went out. Now, how we goin' tuh get it started?"

"I reckon yuh shove 'em," said Mort, getting to his feet with a groan. "My kingdom for a bronc! C'mon, we got tuh do somethin'."

Together they righted the machine. Ren tried first one thing, then another, cursing at the delay meantime. Mort reported that the rider was still unconscious and that they would have to come back and get him later on.

"Come back?" swore Ren. "Hell, we ain't started away yet!"

"Well, you set up in the saddle an' twist her tail, an' I'll shove. Hustle, now, we got five miles yet tuh go."

Ren got upon the seat and grasped the handle bars. Mort braced his feet and placed aching arms against the rear. He shoved. There came a sharp bark, a staccato barking, and the machine leaped suddenly ahead. Mort pitched forward and leaned heavily against the ground. "Bah!" he howled. "C'mon back."

Ren discovered that by shoving the shiny bars to one side he could steer the thing. He began a wide circle and in so doing he twisted the throttle so that the engine slackened. As he swung near to Mort, that worthy made a frantic spring and grabbed the point of the side car in his arms.

"Yow!" shrilled Ren. "Some bull-doggin', fella. Hook your spurs, 'cause we're on our way."

As Mort secured an upright position astride the steel saddle, Ren straightened out and twisted his hands. Like a thing alive, the motorcycle leaped ahead, nearly throwing him backward from the seat.

"Gargh!" choked Mort, trying to force his Adam's apple back into place. "Quit snappin' the whip with muh neck. If I hadn't been hooked good with muh spurs I'd be back there dead some place."

"Sit tight," yelled Ren, "I've found out what makes it go." And indeed he had. The rubber throttle under his sweaty palm moved back and forth. He shoved it around as far as it would go, and in thirty seconds the whipping wind had snatched both his and Mort's hat from their heads.

Well loaded as it now was, the machine was fairly steady, but, even at that, the rough prairie had the side car rider pulling leather for dear life. When Mort could gather breath enough to scream a protest at the excited driver, a bump would jolt it from him and he would spend all his strength in keeping his seat. His dizzy head registered the fact that he'd never made such speed before in his life on anything.

Presently they came to another scene of wreckage. The hotel girl, face buried in her hands, sat on her buckboard seat. Still hitched to the light wagon, but stretched out dead on the ground, was her team. Ren twisted the throttle and slowed down.

"The dirty cowards!" gulped Mort. "They've shot her team. Turn in Ren, we got tuh pick her up."

Ren began a wide circle with the throttle over as far as it would go. The machine slowed down considerably, but didn't stop. "She'll have tuh jump for it, Mort," he said. "If we stop, we may not get it goin' again."

While they continued to circle about the buckboard, Mort called instructions to the girl. She was wide-eyed and apprehensive, but Mort's pleading stirred her to effort. At last she sprang from the seat and landed in his arms. The springs of the side car thumped against the frame, then lifted. Ren straightened

out once more and opened the throttle. In the distance he could see a group of willows, their destination, and, as he turned to shout the information, his eye caught a tawny flash to the westward.

"Nellie!" he cried. "Bless her little heart, she's joined in. Look at that Goldie go!" Then he groaned. "Mud Eye Ferguson! If that devil shoots her hoss or hurts her, I'll—I'll—" He twisted the handle over as far as it would go. Between him and the willows he could now make out several horsemen. Their mounts seemed to be nearly exhausted from the hard run.

So rapidly that it made his eye bulge, Ren overtook the men. He saw one of them raise a gun and fire at Nellie, who was sweeping past some little distance away. He groaned. He dared not lift a hand from the bars to reach for his gun. Mort had his arms full with the girl and could make no move for his gun. There was one thing to do, and Ren Buford, being in love, did it. Straight for the mounted men he steered.

His roaring approach left nothing to be desired in the way of disruption. Guns roared and crashed, but their owners were so occupied in attempts to control plunging mounts that the shots went wild. As he drew nearer, the tired horses forgot their exhaustion and, in fear-spurred frenzy, sped in every direction. Ren continued toward the willows, a shrill cry of triumph from his lips rising above the roar of the engine.

As they dashed into the little yard that surrounded the line shack of the Flying T, Mort gathered the girl tight in his arms and, freeing his spurs, rolled off backwards. Ren slowed down as much as possible and cast himself to one side. The motorcycle swept on and continued a crazy, zig-zag path across the prairie.

Ren leaped to his feet and hurried to the corner of the quarter section that held the shack. His heart almost stopped when he saw a new stake stuck in the ground and tacked to it a bright piece of paper. Somebody had beat him to it! He leaned down and read "Nellie Wilson."

"E-e-e-yip!" he howled happily. "Good for Nellie! Now, if—" He sprinted toward the well, the spot where two more quarter sections came together. He arrived just as Mort finished sinking a stake. "Bessie Wheeler," it read. Ren watched his friend drive still another stake a little ways off. "Mort Carpenter," it read. "Hell, Mort," he grunted, "I ain't got my name on even a pebble. You was s'posed tuh stake out the well quarter."

"Yeah, I know," grinned Mort sheepishly, "but I thought Bessie here should have the one with the water on it. I can dig a well—if I have tuh."

"You can use water from my well," said the girl, her eyes filled with happiness. "My, won't daddy be tickled?"

"Hullo, you folks." The voice came from the line shack door. "Better get cover; things are going to pop around here pretty quick."

"Nellie!" crowed Ren, taking her in his arms. "My gosh, how'd yuh ever get here so quick?"

"Rode," she said simply. "My Goldie can beat anything on wheels or hoof. I was afraid that maybe you wouldn't make it, so I hustled out to make sure of our home. Who is the lady you brought with you?"

"Oh." Mort shuffled his feet. "This is Bessie Wheeler, Nellie. Bessie, this is Nellie-er—well, it's goin' tuh be Buford in a little while. Ren, here, is her—"

Z-z-zing! A bullet spat into the wall just above his head. Swiftly the two girls were swept into the shack.

"It's Mud Eye Ferguson," said Ren reaching for his gun. "I'm sorta glad he's headin' in; I got a lot tuh settle with that hombre."

Peeking from a window ledge, Ren saw three men dash into the yard. One swung toward the well and leaned down to pull the stakes driven there. Ren fired twice and the man toppled forward out of the saddle. Before the echo of the shots had died, Mort's gun was cracking.

"Got one," he called over his shoulder, "but the big hombre pulled your stake, Nellie."

"Yow!" growled Ren. "Let me outa here. No mud-eyed galoot is goin' tuh take my girl's claim. Where is he?"

"He's headin' for my stake, now, dang him. Here, yuh let me go!"

"Please, Mort—" Bessie Wheeler, white of face, grasped him by the arm. "You—you mustn't get killed."

Mort's jaw dropped at the tone of her voice and he stared at her with a new understanding in his eyes. "Yuh don't want me tuh—tuh—"

Ren squeezed past him and swung forward into the yard. "Ferguson," he called, "leave them stakes alone or I'll—"

The big man on the horse turned with a snarl. One hand was full of claim stakes, the other held a six-gun. "Yuh dang runt!" he snapped. "Here's where yuh get—" He stopped as a distant popping reached his ears. Out on the prairie the sun flashed on a bright red machine that still chugged along in ever widening circles. The man raised his gun, but that moment's hesitation had been enough for Ren. Like a flash, his own gun came up and crashed. A shocked look came into Mud Eye Ferguson's face, and the stakes slipped from his hand. He fell over in the saddle, and in that position his now frightened horse carried him out of sight.

Ren set up the stakes once more, then returned to the shack. Nellie was waiting for him with words of approval; a true daughter of the West was she. Mort, with an air of new responsibility and dignity, had his arm about the girl from the hotel, and she was clinging to him as the saviour of her hopes and happiness.

"And we'll build a nice big room just for your pa," Mort was saying.

"Not on this shack yuh won't," interrupted Ren. "This belongs tuh Nellie an' me; don't it, honey?"

"That's what we had intended," she said, "but we won't quarrel with them about it."

"Nothin' like that," said Mort. "We're goin' tuh put up a regular house on them claims out there. If you two are nice, we'll let yuh come over an' drink some of our water. Yuh know the well is—" He paused as a popping sound grew suddenly louder. "It's that—that—"

Crash! A red, blunt nose, and a sadly warped front wheel shoved through the thin side of the shack. Two or three futile gasps came from a smoking engine, then all was still.

"The devil's come home tuh roost," said Mort after a short, wondering silence. "Yuh never treated that tin baby right, Ren, an' now it's gone and died on your hands."

Ren Buford advanced to shove the extinct motorcycle back out of the wall. As he placed a palm against it, he looked in the side car. "Huh!" he snorted. "Treated it right? Why, dang it, it's come all the way back with the grub." He reached in and brought out a can of tomatoes, some bacon, potatoes, a bottle of olives. Placing these on a table, he brought up a couple of benches that sat against the wall.

"Will you an' your lady love join us in the little pre—pre-nuptial lunch?" he asked airily with a wave of his hand.

Mort looked at Bessie.

"I'm—I'm hungry," she confessed.

"We accept your kind invitation, Mr. Bufford; but yuh got tuh promise us that yuh'll come eat Thanksgivin' dinner with us."

Ren looked at Nellie. "Well," she said smiling, "as long as it's just a short distance away, I guess we can make it. But if we do, they'll have to spend Christmas with us."

"That's fair enough," said Bessie happily. "Then at New Year's—"

"Holy mackerel!" cried Ren and Mort in unison. "Yuh'll have us all grandfolks, dead an' buried, if yuh keep on. Let's eat!"

The Feud of Ned Yorke

By
Lew Upton

A few deadly words spoken in calm tones and two men agreed to end their feud by gun-fight. But destiny, by means of a black-haired, blue-eyed girl, settled the score in its own fashion.

THE ranch-house telephone rang, and with a groan the hungry foreman arose from the breakfast table.

"Can't a man even feed in peace?" he muttered. But when he put the receiver to his ear and heard a few words his manner changed and he became all attention.

"Yeah? Where? How?" he cried.

He hung up the receiver and turned excitedly to his punchers. "Big news, boys!" he cried. "The sheriff tells me that a bunch of convicts made a jail break over at the State Pentitentiary yesterday, and they're thought to be headin' this way. They's six of 'em, all bandits and murderers, and that old gun-slinger Scar Tully is leadin' 'em. There's five hundred reward out for 'em, too!"

One of the hands gulped his coffee and grunted skeptically. "Anybody that stops that killer Tully shore earns his five hundred dollars," he declared.

"If that gang of hellions comes my way, I'll crawl in a prairie-dog hole!" asserted another.

"Just the same, keep yore eyes peeled when you're ridin' to-day. They might be around here. The authorities are combin' this part of the state for 'em, and every officer in the county is out in the hills lookin' for 'em to-day."

This news did not affect the appetites of the Bar 8 punchers to a noticeable degree. Once more the only sound heard at the table was the rattle of knife and fork. After a time they pushed back their chairs and arose.

The foreman gave the day's orders. "Red, you and Pete search the brush up near Sage Creek, and run those mavericks in. Ned, I guess you can—"

But Ned Yorke, top-rider of the outfit, shook his head. "I want to take to-day off," he interrupted. "I got important business in Pioneer to tend to."

The foreman paused and looked at his top hand. For the first time he noticed that Ned was clad in his best clothes—new Stetson, bearskin chaps, shining boots. Also, the puncher's gun was low on his thigh, and seemed freshly oiled.

"What are you up to, Ned?" inquired the foreman.

"Got an appointment with George Roberts in Pioneer this evenin'," replied Ned curtly.

The foreman stared at Yorke for a long moment. Then— "You're goin' in to fight him, ain't you?" he demanded.

"What if I am?" snapped Ned. He was outwardly calm, but his voice held a challenge.

"Don't get on the prod now, puncher,"

advised the foreman soothingly. "I'm just tellin' yuh in a fatherly way that you're a danged locoed idjut. Just on account of a senseless little argument you and old Roberts are goin' to shoot the daylights out of each other! What d'you think this is, the old frontier days? Even if you win, the law'll get you later anyway. Damn foolishness, I call it!"

Ned pulled his hat down on his head. "All that may be true," he said, "but just the same Roberts dared me to shoot it out in Pioneer to-day, and that's what I'm proposin' to do! And I'm leavin' now."

"Come back if you live through it, then," replied the foreman.

Ned turned in the doorway.

"Aim to," he responded briefly. "I'll be back to-morrow—maybe. So long fellows!" He waved his hand to his comrades and was off for the corral.

The other buckaroos stared after him. "There'll be a hot time in Pioneer to-night!" murmured one of them.

Ned quickly caught and saddled his roan horse. He pulled the cinch tight with a jerk, mounted and was away, waving his hat in farewell.

He took the road toward Sagetown, the railroad town, from which a rugged trail led through the mountains toward Pioneer.

He rode briskly, for his destination was almost a day's ride away. And as he rode he thought.

How trivial had been the event that led to this bitter feud! Despite his grim determination, Ned could not help smiling at the thought of it. It all seemed so foolish now.

A week before, Ned had ridden over to Pioneer late one afternoon, both to satisfy his curiosity and to spend his money. Having done a little of both, he was riding his bronc down the street, again heading toward home, when the accident occured.

A tall man with iron-gray hair and a firm jaw was walking along the board sidewalk. He had the tanned face and half-narrowed eyes of the plainsman, but he was dressed in expensive store clothes, and in the glow of the sunset, his white shirt front gleamed brilliantly like new-fallen snow.

As he rode by Ned looked idly at the man.

"That hombre's shore dressed fit to kill," was his unspoken thought.

Then his bronc, plodding lazily along without any guidance from his rider, stepped directly into a mud hole.

It had rained recently, and the hole was filled with muddy water. The bronc's foot came down with considerable force squarely in the middle of it. A stream of mud and water flew in the direction of the passing pedestrian, and spattered him from head to foot.

The firm-jawed man stopped and dug the mud out of his eyes. His once white shirt-front was covered with blotches of mud. Trousers, boots and hat had also received their portion of the shower. Bespattered, and sputtering with rage and surprise, he looked so ridiculous that Ned, though sorry, could barely suppress a laugh.

The unfortunate victim's face flushed, and his gray eyes blazed. With two strides he was at the offending bronc's side, and roughly seized the rider by the knee.

"Why the hell don't you look where you're goin'?" he cried furiously.

Up to this point Ned had been calm, and was sorry for the accident and anxious to apologize. But now, when the man seized him by the knee, his attitude changed.

A week before, Ned had been chasing an ill-tempered maverick cow, intending to cut off her horns. The cow had charged unexpectedly and, before he could get his bronc out of the way, she caught Ned just above the knee with the sharp point of one of her horns, and inflicted a painful flesh wound.

It was this wounded knee that the man seized in his sudden rough grasp, and a flash of pain shot through Ned like a searing red-hot iron. He forgot his calmness and flamed into violent anger.

Ned knocked aside the man's hand, and leaped off his horse, white with rage. "Take yore damn hands off me!" he cried.

A few passersby halted curiously. The older man's wrath rose to higher pitch.

"You young ruffian—" he began.

From then on the quarrel moved rapidly

to a climax. Both men, ordinarily peaceful enough, were roused to white-hot fury.

Since both were cowmen, raised in the Western tradition, they did not roar and curse at each other as fish-peddlers might. On the contrary, as they grew more and more angry, outwardly they seemed more and more calm. Their voices held a quiet deadliness, and they spoke in a slow drawl and with exaggerated courtesy.

So things went on to the inevitable outcome—a fight or a challenge.

The older man took the lead in the matter. "I'm awful sorry Mr.—"

"I'm Ned Yorke of the Bar 8 outfit," the puncher supplied promptly.

The man with the iron-gray hair acknowledged the introduction with an unsmiling nod. "And I'm George Roberts of the 5A. As I was sayin', Mister Yorke—" he lingered on the name—"I'm awful sorry, but I've left my gun at home."

"Yes, Mr. Roberts?" responded Ned. "That is certainly too bad." He spoke with great politeness, but there was an underlying edge in his tone.

"But next Friday I'll be here in Pioneer again with my gun on," Roberts went on, "and if you should want to carry this business to a finish, why ride over here and see me then."

"Thanks," drawled Ned calmly. "I'll see you here on the street next Friday at sundown. That suit you?"

"Fine," responded the gray-haired rancher.

And in these harmless words and calm tones a challenge to a gun-battle to the death was made—and accepted, for Roberts and Yorke, looking unsmilingly into each other's eyes, needed no further speech to understand each other. Both knew that this sudden hatred must be wiped out in blood.

They nodded briefly to each other and parted; each went his way, while the bystanders stared wonderingly. Ned jogged slowly on toward the home ranch. He laughed aloud at the foolishness of the quarrel, but it was too late to think of that now. The challenge had been passed and accepted, and if either man failed to appear in Pioneer at sundown on Friday, ready for action, he would be branded forever as a coward.

"George Roberts?" they said at the ranch. "Yeah, he owns the 5A. He's a gun-slingin' fool, too, for all his gray hairs. He plugged Buff Hardy last summer, when Buff was on the prod one day. What's the matter, Ned? You havin' trouble with Roberts?"

But Ned answered little, and practiced his draw, and shot tin cans while the outfit wondered.

And now it was Friday, and he was riding to fight his enemy! As he rode toward Pioneer, Ned looked about with a half sigh. It was almost too fine a day for a fight. The sky was deep blue, and the rolling range was fresh and green from the recent rains. A prairie dog put up his head, glanced knowingly at the rider, and popped back into his hole again.

But Pioneer was far away, so Ned prodded his horse to greater speed. "A long ways to go, bronc, so let's slope along," he said aloud.

At Sagetown, Ned halted for lunch. After a hasty sandwich at the station restaurant, he loitered for a moment outside on the station platform. One smoke and then he'd move on, he decided.

As he began to roll a cigarette, a distant whistle sounded. Soon the passenger train from the East came thundering down the track. Ned looked on listlessly. It ground to a stop, and a girl got off, a few suitcases were passed down, and the train went on again, whistle shrieking.

But Bob did not notice the departing train or whistle. He had glanced up and seen the girl who had just got off the train. The sight of her caused him to stop his cigarette-rolling, and to look on in wonder.

The object of his attention was a slim black-haired girl. Her face was finely cut, her mouth was red and delicate and firm, and her eyes, blue as the sky above, were wide and pleasant. Now blue-eyed brunettes are rare anywhere; but Ned stared at her as though she were the only girl in the world.

The girl turned and faced him, and her eyes met his. For a moment they looked at each other. Then with an effort Ned

broke off his staring and dropped his eyes to the half-rolled cigarette in his hands. He went on building his smoke with an effort at careless ease, but his face was flushed and his hands were trembling.

Then — wonder of wonders — the girl walked toward him! Ned's heart bounded as he looked up at her blue eyes.

"Pardon me, but could you tell me how I can get to Pioneer?" she asked.

Ned knew that her voice would be low and musical. It fitted with the rest of her. He swept off his hat and looked at her for a long moment, then roused himself to reply. "There—there's a stage runs over here every day, ma'am," he relied. "It's about due here now."

"Thank you." She nodded, smiled, and was about to turn away. But Ned could not bear to let her go so soon. He must talk to her, get acquainted with her somehow!

"Is there anything I can do for you, ma'am?" he blurted out at random. "Carry more baggage, or somethin'?"

She stopped again. "No, thank you, there's nothing," she replied. "But could you show me where I can get a glass of water? I'm very thirsty."

Filled with joy, Ned led his new acquaintance inside the station, and got a drink of water for her. While doing so, he wracked his brains to carry on a conversation with her, to make a good impression. They talked at random for a few moments. Afterwards Ned remembered that her voice was low and sweet, and her eyes were dark blue and lit up wonderfully when she smiled. But he could not have told a single word of what she had said.

"You're all dressed up, Mr. Yorke," said the girl after a while. "Are you going to a wedding?"

The question brought Ned to himself. The sight of the girl had driven his trip to Pioneer completely from his mind. But now he remembered that he had to be there at sundown for a gun-fight; duty and honor demanded that he should go.

Ned sighed, and shook his head. "Seein' you made me plumb forget that, ma'am," he replied. "It's not a weddin' I'm goin' to; it's more on the nature of a funeral. I have to be there, so I guess I'll have to leave you now." The expression on his face showed how much he regretted the necessity.

They walked out on the platform again, the girl tripping at his side. How hard it was that he would have to tear himself away from her and go on and fight old Roberts. Ned sighed again. "You—you haven't even told me your name yet," he suggested.

She pursed her red lips and shook her head. "And I won't tell you either, until the next time I see you, Mr. Yorke," she declared. "But about this funeral—is it a close friend?"

Ned pressed her hand, released it and leaped into the saddle. Then he answered her. "Well, not exactly. You see, it ain't quite decided who's goin' to be the deceased in this here funeral. Maybe it'll be a certain other hombre—or maybe it'll be me."

The girl's eyes widened, her face grew pale. She stretched out her hand toward him. "Why—" she began.

Looking at her, Ned felt a sudden rush of emotion. He was trembling, and his eyes were wet. If he stayed an instant longer he'd make a fool of himself on account of her—maybe even stay away from the fight!

So the young puncher gulped and took a grip on himself. "I—maybe I'll not see you again, ma'am," he said in a low tone. "But—I, well, I'll sure try to see you. Good-by!" He prodded his bronc sharply and swung about in haste so that she could not see the tears in his eyes. Then he took the reins and, without even a backward glance, galloped madly northward on the road to Pioneer.

A mile further on he pulled his horse down to a more reasonable pace. The bronc was panting and lathered, and Ned himself looked worried and drawn.

He stopped at a small spring by the roadside to water the bronc and to let him rest a bit. Ned sat down and buried his face in his arms. He felt a strange turmoil within him. Blue eyes, black hair—that girl!

He swore and ran his fingers through

his hair. "I must be moon-struck or somethin'," he reflected. "Well, I'm goin' to forget that girl! I've got business to tend to!" With that thought he rose, hitched up his belt with an air of determination, and rode on again.

A few minutes later he heard a thunder of hoofs ahead of him on the trail. Soon the Pioneer stage came around the next bend, headed for Sagetown, the spirited horses running briskly with heads held high. The bulky gray-haired driver, as motionless and calm as the rocks themselves, sat on top with reins in his hands and pipe in his mouth.

Ned drew his horse to the side of the trail.

"Hey Shorty!" he shouted. The stage came to a stop alongside Ned, and the driver peered down at him. Shorty Jenkins drove one of the few remaining horse-drawn stages in the West. The terribly rough and steep road between Pioneer and Sagetown was passable only to pedestrians, broncs, and the rumbling stage with its four-horse team. Shorty's pride in his calling and in his horses was consequently great.

"Hello Ned!" called Shorty. "Got the makin's?"

Ned passed cigarette papers and tobacco up to him. The driver rolled himself a smoke.

"You've got a dandy passenger for your old rattle-trap to-day, Shorty," offered the puncher.

"Don't you call this here stage a rattle-trap!" replied Shorty indignantly. "It's better'n all yore trucks and—well, what about this passenger?" he added with sudden interest.

Ned shook his head. "Finest lookin' girl that's ever been in this district just got off the train. Says she's goin' over to Pioneer."

"That so?" asked Shorty eagerly. He smoothed back his thinning gray hair. "Guess I better put on a clean shirt then. I been figgerin' it's about time I changed." He picked up a paper-wrapped bundle from the seat beside him.

"You see, Ned," he continued, unwrapping the bundle, "I always carry a clean shirt with me, and then when I get wind that they's a extra pretty passenger comin', or some special occasion or somethin'—"

But Ned had no time for long explanations. He must push on toward Pioneer. "That's right, Shorty," he agreed hastily. "Well, I got to hurry on toward Pioneer; got to see a man."

"So long, Ned!" bawled the stage driver jovially. "Don't let the jail-birds get you!"

Ned Yorke rode on again, on a rough narrow trail that led up toward the top of a steep ridge. And the girl of the station was still in his mind. With a death-duel only a few hours away, he could think of nothing but the charm and beauty of—he didn't even know her name!

Filled with such thoughts, Ned paid little attention to anything about him. A rattle of small stones by the trail side brought him to with a jerk.

He looked up, and saw a face half-hidden in the bushes. It was a dark, unshaven, brutal face, with a great livid scar across one cheek. The cruel little eyes peered into his, a mocking light lurking in their dark depths.

A thrill ran along Ned's spine. He turned slightly in the saddle, and reached quickly for his gun.

But even as he drew his revolver, the face disappeared. Ned rode up to the bush and saw the tracks of heavy shoes, but he could not see the man, nor hear any sounds of his flight.

With an effort he regained his self-possession. After all, the hombre had merely looked at him! And if the fellow did have a face that was half pig and half wolf, it was nothing to get alarmed over!

"I'm gettin' jumpy as an old woman," said Ned aloud as he restored his gun to his holster. "But I guess that hombre felt the same way, seein' as he sloped pretty quick. Well, let's go, bronc!"

The bronc started on toward Pioneer again. The image of the brutish watcher passed from Ned's mind, and once more he thought of the girl in Sagetown.

At last he reached the edge of the town. The sun was a great orange ball in the west, but it was still an hour and a half

till sundown. An hour and a half to wait until Ned and George Roberts confronted each other and wiped out their enmity in gun-fire and blood.

Ned stopped a few rods out of town, on the bank of Stony Creek. He turned his bronc to graze and sat down under an alder tree, idly smoking and glancing about.

The place where he sat was near the intersection of the north-and-south and east-and-west trails. After a few minutes a dusty cowpuncher came in sight from the north. At sight of Ned smoking on the creek bank, he pulled up his bronc.

"Excuse me, stranger," said the newcomer. "But might you be Ned Yorke?"

Ned looked at him for a moment, then replied. "I might be," he responded. "Also, I am."

The other drummed his fingers on the horn of his saddle. He seemed to be choosing his words carefully. "Roberts is at the general store with his six-gun on his hip," he replied. "He's waitin' for you."

Ned arose to his feet and looked toward the west. Beyond Pioneer loomed a towering rocky ridge, its near slope already largely in shadow. "You tell Roberts that when the sun sinks out of sight behind High Ridge, I'm comin' into Pioneer," he drawled. "Tell him to be ready for me."

The newcomer waved his hand without a word, swung his horse, and rode west toward Pioneer.

Net sat staring at his departing figure, and at the little town, and at the sun. As the sun went down, Ned thought again of that girl—

But now the last rim of the sun had sunk from view behind the distant ridge, and Ned rose to his feet. It was time for the fight, and everything else must be put out of mind. "If I come through, I'll see her again," he reflected. "And if I don't, I won't, so there's no use thinkin' about it."

With an effort he shut her out of his mind. He hitched up his gun-belt, and gave his revolver a last examination. Then he mounted and rode on.

He stopped at the first house of the town, a deserted adobe hut, and let his horse stand there with the reins over its head. Then he went on, on foot.

As he passed the first houses, curious eyes peered out at him and men appeared in doorways and windows. All of Pioneer knew that to-night the feud would reach its conclusion. The atmosphere of the town seemed tense, watchful. In the gray twilight, there seemed to be a dim undercurrent of death.

Ned strode down the middle of the street toward the general store, walking slowly, his hand near his hip. A quarter mile away a tall figure stepped from the porch of the store and came to meet him. Ned could not recognize the man's face at that distance, but the broad shoulders and the iron-gray hair told him that it was Roberts.

Lead would be flying pronto now! Ned walked more slowly, his nerves tense and on edge. What a silly quarrel, and now they were going to kill each other—that girl at the station had wonderful blue eyes— So Ned's thoughts raced on and on as he walked.

Now Roberts was only two hundred yards away, and his features were clearly recognizable. With an effort of will, Ned wiped all disturbing thoughts from his mind and became a fighting machine. He walked toward his enemy with stiff short steps, eyes narrowed, body half crouched and tense.

He was within a hundred yards of Roberts now. Suddenly the hoofbeats of a galloping horse reached his ears. The horse was coming nearer, and coming fast. But Ned did not mind that, nor did Roberts. They walked on toward each other, hands at their hips.

The hundred yards between them had shrunk to seventy. A few more seconds and they would go for their guns!

Then, like a thunderbolt, the galloping horse rushed past Ned. Through the cloud of dust raised by the flying hoofs, Ned could see the rider, crouched low in the saddle. It was Shorty Jenkins, the stage driver, torn and blood-stained.

As he passed Ned, Shorty opened his mouth and let out a whoop. "Turn out

everybody. Hurry! They've stole the stage!"

Halfway between the two fighters Shorty pulled up his bronc with a jerk and dismounted. He ran to the watering trough nearby and dipped his bleeding arm in it. "Turn out pronto, damn you all!" he shouted wildly.

The impending fight between Ned Yorke and George Roberts was forgotten. The men of Pioneer surged out into the street from all directions and surrounded the stage driver.

Ned and Roberts both stopped, hesitantly. The street was filled with men, and they could hardly fight now. Yet the one who suggested calling the matter off for the time might be accused of showing the white feather. So they halted and looked uncertainly at each other.

Then Shorty Jenkins spoke up. "Listen, you," he shouted. "Them escaped convicts held me up in the canyon. There's six of 'em, all killers. They shot me up and grabbed the stage and rode north in it. I had a girl along as passenger, and they dragged her along too. I—"

The driver's words affected Ned like an electric shock. In a flash his fight with Roberts was forgotten. The girl he had seen at the station that day!

The puncher shoved through the crowd and seized Shorty by the shoulder. "Did this girl have black hair and blue eyes?" he demanded.

"Yeah," responded the driver. "The jail-birds took her for a sort of pledge, figgerin' we wouldn't dare bother 'em, I guess. She fought like fury, but they—"

"Stop yore chatterin', man!" cried Ned fiercely. "Quick, which way did they go?"

"They turned off at Gunsight Canyon and went north."

Roberts had come up. His tense grim look of the gunman was gone and he was white and anxious and drawn. Disregarding Ned, he seized the driver by the other arm. He licked his lips and was about to speak.

But Ned did not mind his enemy. Something more important was before him now. He swung about and faced the crowd.

"What in hell are we waitin' for?" he cried. "Let's go and get those dirty coyotes!"

He shouldered his way out and ran toward the edge of town, where his horse stood waiting. With one leap he was in the saddle, and savagely he swung his horse about. He started off at a gallop, while the rest of the men still stood staring.

The convicts had taken the northern route through Gunsight Canyon. Ned knew of an old trail, long unused, that ran through a narrow gully into the canyon. Perhaps he could overcome their great lead after all. He had to! That girl was in their hands!

"Let's go fast, bronc," said Ned, and spurred him sharply. The bronc sped along the road, eastward. The young puncher rode alone; the men of Pioneer were forming a posse, but none of them was ready yet. Far behind, a single set of hoofbeats pounded on his trail, but Ned did not even turn to look.

In a few minutes he swung his horse off the road to the north, and took the dim trail that led to the canyon. The dusk was deepening; soon it would be night. Ned looked to the east and thanked the fates that there was a full moon to-night.

The hoofbeats behind him persisted and were drawing nearer. The rider behind must be within a hundred yards now. Ned swung about in his saddle and looked back.

Then his eyes narrowed and involuntarily his hand went to his gun butt, for the man behind was George Roberts, his enemy. For a second, the thought came to him that Roberts was pursuing him to end the feud, and perhaps shoot him down from behind.

But at that moment Roberts raised both hands to show his peaceful intentions, and shook his head. The rancher looked haggard, and white as death. The lines in his face seemed deepened somehow, and he seemed older than he had a few moments before.

Ned felt a bit ashamed of his suspicion. He nodded in return, took his hand away from his gun and turned away. No doubt Roberts was doing the same thing as he

was—pursuing the stolen stage and its load of jail-birds—and the girl. "Roberts must of been hard hit by this business," thought Ned. "Wonder why! Maybe he had his payroll or somethin' comin' in by the stage."

But Ned was not concerned over payrolls. He was thinking of the blue-eyed girl and her flower-like beauty, in the grasp of Scar Tully, jail-bird and killer. The very thought roused him to fury, and a red mist came before his eyes. "Faster, bronc!" he shouted, and the panting horse dashed on.

Roberts stayed close behind, riding hard, white-faced and silent. The two rushed northeast along the narrow trail, the hoofbeats of their mounts echoing and re-echoing among the rocks.

Soon the trail led through the gully. Ned smiled grimly, and felt his revolver. Gunsight Canyon was a scant mile away. And the two of them—he and Roberts, his enemy—must catch and take the stage with its six convicts. If they did not—but Ned thought of the girl again, and knew they did not dare fail.

So the two riders thundered through the gully and came to the canyon. Ned waved to Roberts, close behind, and rode out into the broad rock-walled canyon. Hastily he looked about. There were no tracks; thanks to the short cut, he had come in time!

Roberts drew up alongside and flung himself off his horse.

"Are we in time?" he cried breathlessly.

"They haven't passed yet," said Ned. At that moment there came to their ears from down the canyon a rumble of wheels, a clatter of hoofs, drawing nearer. The stage was coming; they had reached the canyon just in time!

"They're comin', Roberts," said Ned crisply. "Now you get behind the rocks over there, and I'll stay on this side, and then we'll take 'em from both sides at once. Don't let 'em get past, and whatever you do be careful that the girl don't get hurt! Savvy?"

"Yes, watch the girl!" Roberts seized Ned's arm convulsively. "God, if any harm comes to her I'll—" He regained control of himself, shook his head. "Well, let's get set. They're coming," he said briefly. He rode across the canyon, put his horse out of sight, and sat waiting behind a large rock.

Ned did the same on his side of the canyon. The stage was very near now, its rumbling seemed to fill the canyon. Ned crouched waiting, his gun ready.

"Wonder what this girl is to Roberts!" he puzzled. "He's all broke up over her. Well—"

The stage came around the bend. On the driver's seat sat three men, one of them a dark, scarred, villainous looking man—it was the same face that Ned had seen in the brush, on his way to Pioneer! Sudden realization flashed upon Ned. Scar Tully, convict and famous gunfighter and killer! And it was up to him to stop him! Ned took a deep breath.

The stage came on. There were three men on the seat outside, and three inside. The girl could not be seen.

It was time for action. Ned jumped up, leveled his gun. "Put 'em up!" he cried. On the other side of the canyon Roberts also rose with leveled gun.

The driver cursed and pulled up his horses so sharply that they reared back on their haunches. At the same instant, Scar Tully's face contorted into a snarl and his hand moved like lightning toward his gun.

Ned fired, once. Tully, his gun half drawn, gave a jerk and then toppled to the ground. The driver had dropped his reins and snatched up a rifle from the seat behind him. Before he could level it, Roberts sent a shot at him, and, white-faced and helpless, he reeled back with a shattered forearm.

But the third convict on the seat was still to be reckoned with. He tore the rifle from the driver's weakening grasp, brought it to his shoulder in a flash and fired.

At the report, Roberts dropped his revolver and staggered backward, clutching at his throat. Then he fell and lay still.

Now Ned was alone, with four murderous convicts against him, and somewhere in their midst a girl. And because of the girl, his jaw set and a resolve to

win or die filled him. He fired two quick shots at the rifleman on the wagon seat and brought him down, his rifle clattering to the ground with him.

Now the three convicts inside swarmed out of the stage like angry bees. "Get him, boys!" shouted one. They sent a volley of lead at Ned and he dropped behind the rock for shelter.

The bullets spattered against the rock and whizzed by overhead, but the puncher remained undamaged. He raised himself cautiously and sent a couple of quick shots at one man, making him dive for shelter.

Now the battle became an Indian fight, with everyone hidden behind rocks and peering out now and then for a chance to shoot. So it went on while night came, and the full moon rose, throwing everything either into silvery light or black shadow.

The three convicts crawled forward from one shelter to another, maneuvering with the idea of coming upon Ned from behind. Ned merely smiled grimly, reloaded his forty-five and waited.

Ned's fighting blood was up. He would have enjoyed himself, but for the fear for the girl's safety gnawing at his heart. Where could she be? Had she escaped? Or was she still in the stage where a stray shot might find her?

Ned peered out at the stage, now standing apparently deserted in the middle of the canyon, the horses trembling and uneasy. He raised his head a bit higher. No one could be seen within—unless—perhaps that was the flutter of a woman's dress! Suddenly excited, Ned forgot himself and raised up recklessly to look.

The next instant a fusillade of shots broke out, the three convicts fairly pouring lead at the lone puncher. Ned dropped back to shelter as bullets flew all about his head. He hugged the shelter of the rock, thankful that the convicts' fire had been wild.

But the wild volley produced trouble in another direction. A stray shot grazed the flank of the right lead horse of the stage. At the sting of pain the animal leaped with a snort, and plunged forward in the traces.

This stirred the other horses into sudden panic. In an instant they were galloping madly down the canyon in Ned's direction, the stage swaying and banging behind them.

Then suddenly a girl appeared in the doorway—*the* girl. Ned caught his breath at the sight of her in the clear moonlight. She was white-faced, her blue eyes were wide, her black hair whipped about in the wind. Confused and frightened, she stood uncertainly in the doorway of the stage, while the horses plunged frantically on.

The girl was in great danger. Ned, disregarding his own danger, leaped to his feet and ran toward the middle of the canyon. It would be madness to try to stop the horses, so Ned stopped just to one side of their course.

A shot rang out, and a bullet kicked up dust at his feet, but the young puncher did not notice. He crouched slightly, and held out his arms. The stage was almost alongside him, the girl still in the doorway. "Jump!" he cried.

Her blue eyes looked into his, and recognition, gladness came into them. She nodded, and, a few breathless seconds later, jumped into his arms. He caught her firmly and held her, even though the sudden impact staggered him. As he did so, another shot went over his head.

He was in the center of the canyon, unprotected, with the girl in his arms. His mind worked quickly in the emergency. He turned his back upon the enemy, so that his own body might serve as a shield for the precious burden in his arms. Then he ran diagonally toward the large sheltering rocks at the side of the canyon.

Now a ragged volley broke out, as a fierce exultant cry went up from the three convicts. They saw their enemy helpless, out in the open with a girl in his arms, and they turned their guns upon him like hunters after a rabbit.

But Ned was making the run of his life. Crouched low, he went on in great leaps, twisting and dodging as he ran. The girl lay quiet in his arms. To Ned her slim rounded figure seemed light as a feather.

There was a large flat-topped boulder

twenty yards away, and toward this shelter he ran with every nerve tense, every muscle straining. In his heart was a silent prayer that he might reach the rock, that the girl might be safe, even if he died as soon as he reached its shelter.

He was closer to the rock, and the bullets of the enemy were singing close about him overhead, and sending up spurts of dust as they struck almost at his feet. Then suddenly there was an impact that sent him to his knees.

He scrambled up again in an instant, blood welling from a wound in his left leg just above the knee. It was, fortunately, a flesh wound, and Ned was able to go on again, despite the agonizing pain.

He went painfully on, and the sheltering rock was only a step away. A bullet struck the edge of his boot and tore a ragged hole. The firing doubled in volume as the convicts made a last effort.

Then suddenly there was a pain as though a red-hot iron had entered his right side, and he dropped. But he fell partly behind the sheltering mass of the great boulder. He had won. Regardless of the damage to himself, the girl was safe and unharmed.

The girl freed herself from his grasp, while he lay still and helpless, still partly exposed.

"Beat you that time, you coyotes!" he muttered dully. There had been a lull, but now the firing broke out again. Ned's head and shoulders were in the shelter of the rock, but the rest of his body was outside, exposed. A bullet ripped off his boot-heel; the puncher stirred a bit, sighed, and lay still again.

But the girl, her blue eyes desperate, seized him under the armpits and tried desperately to drag him to safety. "Come, Yorke—Ned, come, you must!" she cried frantically.

Her voice roused him a bit, and, with his efforts and hers together, at last he was safe behind the rock.

Once more he lay still and once more the girl aroused him, shaking him gently by the shoulders. He sighed, and looked up into her blue eyes.

"They're coming, Ned," she said quietly. And indeed the firing had ceased, and there was only the sound of cautious footfalls as the three convicts crept forward, closing in like a pack of wolves on their prey.

Then they would get him—and the girl—after all! That must not be! He shook his head to clear away the mist from before his eyes. With an effort he dragged himself to a sitting position. He drew his gun and peered around the edge of the rock.

The three men were advancing slowly and confidently, guns in their hands. They thought that Ned was disposed of, that the fight was over. "We'll take his gun and his girl, and skip out," suggested one, and the others laughed harshly.

But at that moment flame and lead began to spout from the side of the rock as Ned's forty-five went into action, swift and accurate. One of the toughs fell, another clutched his arm with a cry, then took to his heels. His unwounded companion, panic-stricken at this sudden surprise attack, dropped his gun and followed suit.

So the last of the convict gang was disposed of, and Ned and the girl held the field.

Then Ned did the boldest thing of his life. He was wounded and bleeding, but he disregarded that. He dropped his gun, and sat up straight, looking at the girl. She was beautiful in the moonlight. "I don't know your name," he said slowly, "but I love you."

Then he took her gently and drew her into his arms, and she smiled and did not resist. But now that the strain and danger were over, the puncher's wounds and loss of blood had their effect. Gradually Ned's senses left him, and he went limp in the girl's soft arms. It was so that the posse from Pioneer, arriving at last, a few minutes later, found them—

At dawn the stage started out on its return journey from Pioneer to Sagetown. It went very slowly now, and paused for each bump. Shorty Jenkins drove with greater care than ever before in his life. His stage contained two wounded men and a girl.

The wounded convicts, with their dead chief, were being taken to the county seat in a chuck wagon. Their opponents, Roberts and Ned Yorke, had both been found unconscious and wounded.

"Yorke's got two flesh wounds, and Roberts' collar bone is smashed. They'll pull through," pronounced the doctor who had accompanied the posse, after making an examination.

"Which is not so bad, considerin' the damage they done to these jail-birds," commented a cowman.

So the stage was brought around, the horses subdued and quiet, and the two wounded men gently placed in it, while the girl sat between them, tears in her eyes. Then they set off for the hospital at Sagetown.

Ned was the first to recover consciousness. He opened his eyes and looked up at the girl. Then he smiled and pressed her hand, and kissed it. "I love you," he whispered weakly.

At this point Roberts, lying stretched out at the other side of the stage, stirred and groaned faintly. Then he lifted his head, and looked at the girl. "Mary," he said faintly, and kissed her other hand, which lay in his.

Ned lay looking on, and a surge of jealousy and pain went through him. There was his old enemy across the way, making advances to the girl he loved! Roberts and he'd have to settle it for good when they were well again!

But then the girl turned her blue eyes toward him, and smiled, and Ned felt ashamed of his jealousy. After all, it was for her to choose. And if Roberts won her, he'd be a good sport and bear his loss!

So Ned raised his head slightly and grinned. "Hello, Roberts," he said.

"Hello, Yorke," replied the rancher pleasantly, no enmity in his voice now.

"Guess we fixed the jail-birds," said Ned.

Roberts shook his head, and then sighed at the pain it caused him. "You did most of it, and I'm thankin' you now for savin' Mary here," he said quietly, pressing the girl's hand. Ned looked on with a pain in his heart, but he smiled.

"'Bout this feud of ours," Ned broke out, "I guess — well, it was interrupted just in time 'fore we salivated each other. Now I see that I was a damn fool at the beginnin' of it, and since we fought together, and—well, what'd you say we call off this business, and be friends?" He held out his hand.

Roberts grasped it firmly. "Friends it is," he replied. "Guess I was a worse fool'n you in startin' it, at that. And anyway, I couldn't have any quarrel with you after you saved my daughter." He looked up at the girl as he spoke.

A load seemed lifted from Ned's heart. "Daughter?" he cried.

"Why, sure," laughed Roberts. "What d'you s'pose I am, her sweetheart or her grandson?"

"I guess it's time to tell you my name," replied the girl, her blue eyes twinkling. "It's Mary Roberts."

A great happiness surged through Ned. His wounds and weakness were forgotten. He raised himself on one elbow, and seized Mary's hands in his. "Why, then, it's not—there's—I mean—" words failed him.

He drew Mary down beside him. He looked across at Roberts, and grinned.

"I guess we got to be friends now," he said. "I can't quarrel with my future father-in-law!"

And then, while her father looked on, Ned kissed Mary's warm red lips.

The Lobo Ranger

By Araminta Abbott

Coming back to the little Western town that had once been his home, the Lobo Ranger brought a loaded gun and a heavy heart. Soon the gun was empty and his heart as light as a feather.

AT the precise moment that Ken Mark sat in the back room of the Blue Eagle and glared sharply at a group of shrinking henchmen, a lone rider, dressed in black and mounted on a coal black horse, sat easily near the edge of an arroyo and watched the wild stampede of several thousand steers. It was a job well worth the doing, the stampeding of those cattle, for they bore a multitude of brands; a great many of them would find their way back to original owners before they could be rounded up again. A grim smile of satisfaction flitted across the face of the lone rider as he lifted his wide black hat and mopped a perspiring forehead.

Ken Mark chewed savagely at the butt of a cigar and ran his cold eyes over the group of men. Hard looking specimens, they were, with scarred, stubby faces and unkempt hair. Guns, suspended by cartridge filled belts, hung at their hips. Hands that weren't busy rolling nerve soothing cigarettes, fluttered aimlessly at the gun butts. One man pulled a flask from his pocket, but replaced it hastily as Mark's cold eyes fastened on him.

"Well?" Mark spat the cigar from his mouth and straightened in his chair.

"We couldn't find 'em," ventured a tall man, evidently the leader of the group.

A cold, cynical smile lifted the corners of Ken Mark's lips; a smile that did anything but ease the attitude of the men before him. "I might have expected it," he said. "You're a bunch of dodos, bums, blockheads. How do you know it is 'them'?"

"It takes more than one or two men to run off a bunch of broncs that size," said the tall man. "Besides, Zeke, here, swears he saw more'n that."

Zeke, the man that had pulled the flask, shrank before the steady gaze of his superior.

"Zeke was probably seeing a lot of things at that time. If he don't quit drinking while he's out on business, I'll cut his throat!" The man called Zeke whipped the flask from his pocket and sent it hurtling out of an open window.

"Dubois, I made you a right-hand man because you seemed to know the ropes and would follow my orders. I own this valley and every damn thing in it, man, woman, child and critters. You know what I want, and yet you'll let somebody come in here and take anything they want."

"Hell, Ken, ain't I doin' my best? I've run this gang ragged tryin' to get those hombres."

The waiting men would have rather heard a string of curses than see that same cynical smile play across the face of Ken Mark. It wasn't rage, that smile; it hinted at, threatened for them, something worse than mere curses. They shifted uneasily.

"Your best! Five of you, and more if needed, and yet you fail. Where's your brains, Dubois? Have you laid around the Blue Eagle so long you've cooked 'em in whiskey. Bah! Now, you'll get one more chance. Stop at the bar and tell Fat to give you one round of liquor, then you fan it out of town and don't come back without a string of scalps. I mean it! If those damn ranchers up in the hills have banded together, I want their hides. I own this valley and I won't have no pot filler gang robbin' me of my stuff. Now go!"

Almost eagerly the men started to leave the small room; it was worse than a week without food to have to face Ken Mark at such times. Dubois paused in the doorway as a breathless, perspiring man ran toward him. A crowd of curious faces on the Blue Eagle's dance floor watched him while he plunged for the door, pushed the tall man aside and entered. With a new fear clutching at them, the four men and Dubois waited while the newcomer halted before Ken Mark.

"Stampede!" he panted. "About an hour ago. The whole upper valley herd —gone! I tried to stop it, so did the other boys, but no go. They was mad, scared to death by somethin'. Must have been fifty men there to stampede that big a bunch. I tried—to—" He paused in his breathless report to regard the man before him. Ken Mark's high forehead and thin, eagle-like face was devoid of expression. His long fingers tapped the table beside him ominously.

The flushed face of the messenger drained of color; he spread his hands in a silent appeal. Mark's cold eyes appraised him in a deadly manner. "The upper herd, eh? Gone! Well, I guess they're worth the no account life of one bum herder!" Like the strike of a snake his hand dove beneath his arm. There came the dull glint of a blued gun barrel, and then a flash. Without a cry the messenger pitched forward and sprawled at the feet of his killer.

In the silence that followed, Dubois and his four men slipped from the little office room and, without stopping for their drink, hastened into the night.

At the shot, the people in the dance hall tensed. They waited expectantly. Presently Ken Mark lounged through the doorway of his small office and calmly looked over the crowd. They relaxed and took up their various amusements. The man who owned the town of Shut Eye jerked a thumb over his shoulder and the dirty aproned barkeeper slipped behind him and entered the small office.

At the darkened end of the town's one street stood a livery stable. Out of the darkness of the night a darker blotch appeared and approached the livery stable from the rear. He was leading a long-legged horse that followed him gingerly but confidently. Through the wide rear door a lantern shone, its dim glow a yellow flicker in the darkness. The man leading the horse walked toward it.

"Can you put up my horse for the night?"

An old man, carrying a pitchfork, paused within the circle of the lantern's light; he cocked a shaggy gray head first at the horse and then at the man. "Reckon so", he said. "Bring him on in. They's an empty stall right over yonder."

The man with the horse moved forward. In the stall he merely slipped the bridle and loosened the saddle girth. "No grain; just some hay," he said.

"Stranger here, ain't ye?" queried the old man reaching for the lantern.

"Yes," briefly.

"Humph! Strangers are welcome in Shut Eye—as long as they got any money."

"I'll pay you in the morning."

"Oh, I ain't in no hurry—didn't mean that; I only meant—" He lifted the lantern to peer curiously at the stranger in black. He hoisted the smoky light a bit higher, craned his wrinkled neck to peer closer, then lowered the lantern swiftly. "Sufferin' cats!" he exclaimed.

"Easy, Dad, somebody might hear you."

"It's—it's Jack Belmont, ain't it?"

"Right the first time. I didn't think you'd recognize me."

"I'd know them gray eyes o' your'n in hell. Boy, what you doin' in this town?"

"Nothing, as yet. I just arrived. Where can we talk?"

The old man glanced cautiously about at the gloom of the stable. "Up to the house," he whispered. "I'm just through here an' we'll go right up." With a snap of the wrist he put out the light and led the way across the livery yard. Opening a gate he shoved the visitor through and then fell into step beside him.

"You're a sight for sore eyes, Jack," he said. "I never allowed to see you again after that mornin'."

"I'd heard that you weren't able to get away from Mark, Dad. What's the trouble?"

"Too old, son. I tried it once but he caught me an' brought me back. Y'see, I know too much. It's a hell of a place to bring Nettie up in, but what's an' old beezer like me to do? I'd a killed Ken Mark long ago if I'd a had the nerve."

"Nettie? She's here with you?" A strained tang had come into the soft voice of the young man.

"Yeah, she's here. Wouldn't leave me now, although they was a time she'd a gone away to school some'eres if Ken would have let her. He's a devil, Jack."

"A devil that belongs in hell, Dad. I'm thinking they need him down there."

In the darkness the old man gripped his sleeve. "You goin' to kill him, Jack boy?"

"That depends. I've planned on it ever since that morning when we buried what was left of my folks, and I reckon, should the chance come, he and me will tangle."

"Are you prepared, son? Can you shoot straight and fast? You know he's wicked with a gun; carries it in a new fangled dingus under his arm."

"I've been preparing all these years, Dad, and I'm ready, if it comes to that. Did you ever hear of the Lobo Ranger?"

"Lobo Ranger? The fella with the Texas riders that allus goes arter his men alone? Yes. I've heard of him."

"Well, I'm—the Lobo Ranger!"

"Hell!" gasped the old man. "Jack Belmont the Lobo Ranger—the wolf man!"

"I'm not bragging, Dad Kelso; I'm just identifying myself—and my readiness."

They had reached the rear door of a small cottage screened by willows. Dad Kelso clutched Lobo's arm and halted him. He seemed to be searching for words. Presently he spoke. "Jack, Nettie don't look the same as you saw her last; she's—purty, if I do say it. She's goin' to be right suprised to see the boy she used to play with out there in the valley."

"I've thought a great deal about Nettie," said the Ranger. "I remember how I loved her in those kid days."

"Of course you loved her, an'—well—Huh! Let's go on in."

The Lobo Ranger stepped into a cottage that was a model of orderly neatness. Over the old man's shoulder he glimpsed the back of a girl who was leaning over a small stove. Gone were the twin pig tails that had hung down her back when he saw her last; gone was the gangling awkwardness of figure he remembered; and gone was—she turned to greet them—the freckled face and tilted nose. Jack Belmont suppressed a gasp of amazement.

"'Lo, Nettie girl," greeted her father. "Got comp'ny for supper. Give you one guess who it is."

The girl's face, flushed from the stove heat, slowly paled; wide blue eyes searched a pair of gray ones questioningly, then a cry slipped from her lips.

"Jackie! Jackie Belmont!" She sprang across the floor and into his arms.

The Lobo Ranger strained her to him

with an impulsive tenderness born of memory. His lips touched the brown curls against his shoulders and for a moment he fought the first tears that had threatened since the morning he had seen his father and mother lowered into prairie graves. "Nettie," he murmured, "my little pal."

At his words she sprang back; her face took on a new flood of color.

"I was so glad to see you I—I forgot."

"Forgot what?" he asked smilingly.

"That I'm a woman, now."

"A beautiful woman," he agreed, "I'm glad to see you, Nettie."

Dad Kelso leaped for the stove and jerked a smoking skillet into the air. "Steak is burned, now," he proclaimed, hopping first on one foot and then another. "Set another plate, girl, an' frisk them biscuits outa the oven, for they're scorched, too."

At length the three sat down to the small table. Dad Kelso cut the steak and heaped potatoes and biscuits on to the plates; but when all was ready none of them ate very much. They sat there looking at one another with strange emotions coursing through them. The girl and her father hadn't seen this boy since the morning they had helped to bury his parents. A gangling youth himself then, torn with grief that had never been completely healed. A few mumbled words over a heap of sod, a last glance at a smoking home, a youthful vow, and he was gone.

Jack Belmont shifted his glance from the girl to the old man across the table. Several large tears were coursing down his wrinkled cheeks, his leathery lips were trembling.

"An' now, son, what do you aim to do?" the old man said.

For a long moment the Lobo Ranger kept his eyes on his plate. When he looked up his gray eyes were veiled by narrowed lids. "I'm going to take what is rightfully mine," he said slowly. "If getting it means getting Ken Mark, then I'll get him. Have you heard of any raids on his valley stuff lately?"

"Gosh, yes," exclaimed Kelso. "A big bunch of broncs have been driven off, an' to-day a big herd of cattle were stampeded. Must be some gang out for revenge ag'in, Mark."

The Lobo shook his head. "Not a gang—just me!"

"Hell!" spouted the old man. "Just you, eh? Lobo is right; you sure are a wolf. Why, dang it, I bet two-thirds of that bunch of beef get back to the right owners. Ken'll have to steal 'em all over again. Holy hop toads!" He gazed at the youth in admiration.

But Nettie Kelso's face was worried. "Ken Mark will be suspicious of every stranger now. He'll—oh, Jack, he's utterly ruthless. He kills without provocation; he owns this valley and everything in it."

"He doesn't own you!"

"No—not yet," it came in almost a whisper.

The muscles under the Lobo's black shirt ridged. "Not yet?" He glanced at the old man. Dad Kelso's lips were working soundlessly. The girl lowered suddenly frightened eyes to her plate.

"Not yet?" repeated Jack. "What do you mean?"

"Speak up, Nettie," demanded Kelso harshly.

"Mark called here to-day," she began but stopped as her father scrambled to his feet.

"I'll—I'll kill him!" choked the old man.

Jack motioned for him to be seated. "You leave that to me, Dad."

"He called," she went on, "to tell me he expected me to come down to the Blue Eagle and be his cashier."

"Never!" snapped her father. "He can do with me what he wants, but never shall you do such a thing."

"I told him I'd speak to you about it," she said. "He just laughed!"

"Laughed, did he, the devil? He'll laugh in hell when I—"

"You leave him to me," said Jack again, "I promise you that Nettie will never go down to the Blue Eagle to work. I'd rather you wouldn't antagonize him just now. Let him think that you are reluc-

tant about it, but that you don't dare to refuse him. Just stall him along for a few days until I can lay further plans. I've got to move fast while I'm here."

After the dishes had been cleared away, they pulled the window blinds tighter and sat down to talk over old times. The old man did most of the talking, however, while Nettie and Jack sat and listened. The girl's eyes wandered continually to the broad-shouldered man that had been her playmate during those happy days of homesteading. She acknowledged that in him now rested her hopes of escaping the fate of all Mark's hostages, and her heart sang with the joy of his presence. The Lobo Ranger contemplated his coming task and the added importance of her danger. The thought of this pretty girl, this old playmate of his, acting as cashier for Ken Mark gave an added impetus to his plans. He smiled grimly, and she, sensing the cause of the smile, reached over and laid a warm hand on his arm.

"You'll be careful, won't you, Jack?"

His lean, white hand covered hers. "As careful as the job will let me. I know what I'm up against in Ken Mark, but I've prepared for it and am not afraid. When I leave Shut Eye, several old scores will be settled."

At midnight he rose to leave. Kelso began a protest but was silenced by his guest. "It wouldn't do for me to be seen coming out of your house, Dad. Ken Mark knows you hate him, and he will naturally judge a stranger likewise. I'll drop in again after dark to see you, but at any other time I must be a stranger to you. You savvy, my friend?"

"Yes," answered the old man placing a hand upon his shoulder. "But if you get into a tight place an' I'm aroun'—I'll die with you, my boy."

The Lobo Ranger laughed and shook his head. "Remember her," he said pointing at the girl.

"I was when I said it," sputtered Kelso.

As Jack Belmont walked down the dimly lighted street toward the Blue Eagle he met two men carrying a third. As he stepped aside to let them pass he heard muttered curses and the name of Ken Mark. Evidently another victim of the valley's ruler, he thought, little guessing that the stampede of the afternoon was the cause of it.

At the door of the Blue Eagle he paused to peer about. The large room was still well filled with patrons, some of whom were much the worse for Ken Mark's panther milk which was being served across the bar. The Lobo Ranger presently stepped inside and took up a position near the end of the bar. He ordered a drink, fingered the glass, and began making mental pictures of the place's exits. He also marked the position of every table and window. There might come a time when such knowledge would be useful.

While he stood there, the office door opened and a man stepped out. Jack Belmont knew him instantly as Ken Mark; the man's appearance had been indelibly printed on his memory years before. The owner of Shut Eye, as was his custom, surveyed the occupants of the room carefully before he ventured very far in. At length he saw the black clad stranger near the end of the bar and walked toward him. He had covered half the distance that separated them when a man at a nearby table lurched to his feet, pulled a gun, and stood swaying uncertainly with the weapon pointed at Mark.

"I've got yuh, Ken Mark," he husked drunkenly. "Your time has come. Jus' try tuh pull that gun on me the way yuh did my brother tuh-night. He's the last man you're goin' tuh kill, 'cause I'm goin' tuh drill your carcass plenty."

Ken Mark halted. He surveyed the weaving man coldly, calculatingly. Just for a second his eyes flickered toward the black stranger then flew back to the man with the pulled gun. "Your brother?" he said evenly. "What do you mean?" His hand raised to a breast pocket and plucked a white handkerchief out. He dabbed with it at his lips, folded it carefully and made as though to replace it. Instead, his hand darted beneath his arm pit, flicked out and there came a loud report. The man with the six-gun stared blankly for a moment, then slumped to the

floor. The blue-barreled gun of the killer swung over to cover the Lobo Ranger.

"Friend of yours?" came the cold question, with a nod at the still form.

A slow smile lifted the corners of the Lobo's mouth. "Never saw him before," he answered. "I just got in from Texas. Right smart shootin', I calls it." Calmly he drained the glass in his hand. Mark's gun disappeared beneath his coat. With a flick of his thumb he indicated the disposal of the man on the floor. Two men leaped to his bidding.

"From Texas, eh?" Mark regarded him closely. Jack Belmont tensed in case there came a recognition, but Mark seemed satisfied and lounged against the bar. He snapped his fingers for the drinks. "Intend to stay with us long?"

"Not very; just passing through. You own this place?"

"I own this whole valley." There was nothing of pride in the statement; rather it hinted a warning.

Jack felt his hate for the man begin to swell. To conceal this emotion he straightened from the bar and said, "Reckon I'll look around a bit." With an air of curiosity, he left the killer and strolled toward the gambling tables. Shortly after, the occupants of the room relaxed, and he knew that Mark had left.

The Lobo Ranger lingered but a brief period in the Blue Eagle. On his way out he asked the bartender about the hotel and, receiving directions, he stepped leisurely into the darkness.

Ken Mark hastened down the street to the livery barn. Without a light of any kind he entered the dark portal of the building and presently emerged astride a wiry horse. Even alone and in the blackness of night his face was expressionless; but this was no indication of the turmoil that seethed behind the mask. He was worried. Evidence pointed to an organized gang which preyed upon his stock holdings. Horses had disappeared; cattle had been stampeded; he felt an antagonistic atmosphere among his men. They had helped him acquire the valley, had stolen and killed for him, and in return he had given them a mere living only. He had felt for some time that it was only fear of him that held them in check. His two killings that night had been for far more than the surface reason; the men must be kept in fear.

West from Shut Eye sped the horse. It was exceedingly dark, but he knew every foot of the way. After an hour's riding he came to a halt. It was near this spot that the cattle had grazed before the stampede. Ken Mark wondered if the years had dulled his skill at sign reading. He dismounted, scratched a match across his boot heel and leaned forward.

He heard the thing, knew what it was before it settled over his shoulders; but even then he was too late for his gun. The rope tightened with a hiss and pinioned his arms down to his body. There came a jerk, a creaking of saddle leather, and his body spun about and began a series of thudding bounces over the sod. His struggle to gain his feet was useless, so he gritted his teeth to the pain of many bruises. When at last the rope slackened, the form at the end of it was limp and unconscious. A dark figure looped in the rope, ran fingers over the slumped body, then propped it against the rusty remains of a stove that had once cooked the food of a homesteader.

At daylight, Dubois and his men, returning from an unsuccessful search for stock, saw an unusual blotch upon the plain. As they neared the spot, the blotch resolved itself into a figure that lurched to a standing position.

"Hell," exclaimed Dubois, "it's Ken! What's he doin' here in that condition?"

Ken Mark's face and body were a mass of cuts and welts. Just one curse escaped his lips, however. He glared at the men that stood watching him in awestruck silence.

"Dubois," he said thickly, "what homesteader had this place before we turned him out?"

Dubois glanced about him. "Why, Ken, it seems to me this here was that fella Belmont's. Yeah, that's right. I remember we burnt him out. This was his stove."

"But he and his old lady were both killed."

"Yeah— Why?" Dubois was trembling.

"Why?" spat Mark. "I was roped and dragged here by some member of the Belmont tribe last night, that's why. Whoever it is leads the stampede gang, probably. Damn 'em! Ah, I remember. Wasn't there a kid, a brat runnin' around here after the fire that time?"

"By golly, you're right, Ken. They was a kid I 'member, spunky little devil, too. D'yuh s'pose—?"

"Find him and get him!" came Mark's order.

From that time on until they reached Shut Eye, Ken Mark's lips remained sealed in a thin line. The loss of horses and cattle had shrunk into insignificance as compared to the threat of the Belmont kid. It was a threat, a threat that meant something worse than the usual thing; for the brat could have killed him the night before had he chosen. Instead he had merely dragged the ruler of the valley to the spot of the burned cabin and left him there. That act had displayed a confidence that was seldom experienced against Ken Mark.

Late that afternoon, with his bruised face patched and salved, the owner of the Blue Eagle again sat in his little office. He was alone, and his eyes were staring fixedly at the door. There was much that occupied his thoughts: the loss of his stock; the attempts at revenge by some gang, led, no doubt, by the Belmont kid or somebody friendly to the homesteader's memory; and Nettie Kelso. Somehow the thought of her salved the unpleasant reflections. She was pretty, beautiful, and she was his. He'd dallied too long with her now. It was time to claim her in fact, bring her to the Blue Eagle and keep her there. He'd probably have to kill Dad Kelso to get her, but he knew that the old fellow would have to be put out of the way sometime; he knew too much about the valley. Yes, he'd get the girl, then reorganize his followers and give battle to the raiders. He'd secured the territory that way, and he'd keep it that way. Ken Mark was not a man to be baited or fooled with.

Still busy with his plans, he resented the hasty entrance into the office of Dubois. His right-hand man was breathless, his features wore a startled look and as he closed the door behind him, he leaned against it as though to keep it closed.

"Well—?" demanded Mark.

"D'yuh know who's out there at the bar?" said Dubois disregarding the warning in the eyes that surveyed him.

"As I haven't looked lately, I reckon there's nobody there we don't know except maybe that black-dressed fella from Texas."

"It's the black-dressed fella I'm talkin' about," said Dubois. "He's from Texas, all right. He's the Lobo Ranger!"

"The Lobo Ranger? What's he want? Why didn't you plug him? What are you scared about?" The questions came out like the firing of a machine gun.

"Plug him? Say, Ken Mark, that hombre chased me clear across the Mex line once an' shot my hat off at two hundred yards when he had tuh stop. Plug him? Not me! That's your job."

"My job! What do you suppose I'm hirin' you for? He's acted peaceable enough so far. He's your enemy, not mine. You're supposed to whack off any law that comes in here."

Dubois' hand dropped to the butt of his gun. He watched the man who was his master carefully. "The reason it's your job," he began slowly, "is because I remember, now, that the Lobo Ranger's other name is Belmont!"

Drawn like they had been seized with cramps, Ken Mark's legs curled back under his body, the soles of his feet, like those of a cat, felt for a foothold before the spring. Dubois clasped his gun with trembling fingers and he fought for the courage to draw.

"You liver-hearted snake!" hissed Mark. "You come in here and tell me that when you had a chance to kill him first!"

"A chance? Me? I tell yuh, Ken Mark, there ain't a man in this valley fast enough tuh get a gun on the Lobo Ranger, least of all me. I've fought for yuh, stole for yuh, done everything yuh wanted up tuh now, but I'll see yuh in hell afore I'll drag-iron with that hombre."

It was the first time Dubois had ever openly rebelled against his commands. Mark reasoned that there must be some great and sufficient cause for it. His tense attitude did not relax, but the impression of being about to spring left. His hand glided under his shoulder and came out with the gun; he twirled the cylinder and glanced at the door. Head high on the partition back of the bar was a peep hole. Softly he got to his feet and placed an eye to it.

"The Lobo—Belmont ain't out there now. You been seein' things again. Dubois?"

"You're dang right I been seein' things, too many of 'em, worst of which is the Lobo Ranger. If he ain't out there now, it's prob'ly because he's huntin' a way tuh get closer to us."

"Where's the rest of our bunch?" said Mark returning swiftly to cold business.

"Scattered from hell tuh breakfast after broncs an' beef. I don't reckon we got three good fightin' men in Shut Eye. We'd better wait till some of 'em get back."

"Wait!" sneered Mark. "Wait for that fella to hunt us out like a couple of scared coyotes? That ain't my way of doin'."

Dubois managed a shrug. "Go ahead, then, an' I'll tell the boys yuh died fightin'."

Something like a snarl sounded in Mark's throat. With a back hand swing he planted the hard barrel of his gun across Dubois' face. The henchman dropped like a log. Swinging open the door, the boss of Shut Eye strode out into the barroom. At his growled question a bartender pointed to the door. "The fella dressed in black has been gone ten minutes. Got on his horse an' rode west down the street."

Mark reached the livery stable with his lust for battle a trifle cooled. He remembered his experience of the night before. The man that had roped and dragged him had been as quiet as a cat. Added to this was the reputation Dubois had given him, which made a combat out on the prairie a doubtful thing to contemplate. Perhaps it would be better to wait a while. He went on into the barn and sought out old man Kelso. The barn keeper was humming a broken little tune which stopped altogether when he saw his visitor.

"Has that stranger been keeping his horse here?" asked Mark shortly.

"Yeah, he has been; but he's gone now. Rode out of town just little while ago."

"Do you know who he is?" Hard eyes bored down at the smaller man.

"Well, I heard him say somethin' about being from Texas, but aside from that he was mighty quiet about things."

"Do you know who he is?" insisted Mark. He remembered that Kelso had been a friend and neighbor to the Belmonts.

"I'm just as curious as you are, Ken. I aimed to find out about him but he up an' left afore I had a chance."

Mark uttered a disgusted grunt and without enlightening his barn man in any way, hurried back to the Blue Eagle.

At the time that Mark was talking with Dad Kelso, a horse stood in a small shed back of the cottage in the willows. The horse's head was covered with a blanket and he stood quietly waiting its removal. In the kitchen of the cottage Nettie Kelso was remonstrating with Jack Belmont for the folly of his daylight visit.

"I just had to see you once more, Nettie."

"Once more?"

"Well, things are coming to a head sooner than I expected. I don't know just what may happen, and—well." He stepped near her and put his arms about her. "If things don't just happen my way, I'd like to pass out knowing that I'd seen you once more."

"Jackie!" The whisper was full of fright. "Won't you please leave Shut Eye now? I've been thinking, and—and I don't believe I could stand it if you were —killed. Give it up and leave. I'll—I'll go with you if you will. Dad will come, too."

He shook his head. "That wouldn't do, Nettie. I've spent too many years preparing for this. If we did leave, Ken Mark would follow, and it would mean a fight with him sooner or later anyway."

"But he wouldn't know who—"

"Yes, he would," he interrupted; "I've been recognized."

He felt the girl in his arms stiffen. "Recognized?"

"A fellow I once was after saw me; Dubois his name is. He scuttled right into Mark and told him. There'll be a hasty gathering of the gang, now, and my hide will be slated for the fence."

"But what can you do against them all?"

"I'll strike before they get their feet under them. The gang is scattered now, so to-night—!"

For several moments the girl remained silent in his arms. Jack tried to think of something comforting to say, but in the face of coming events this was a hopeless task. He patted her shoulder and pressed his lips against her hair. He felt warm tears dropping upon his hand and his throat tightened.

"I wish—" the voice was muffled and husky.

"Yes?" he encouraged.

"I wish I was a man," with sudden vehemence. She left the circle of his arms and stepped back. "Oh, why can't I go with you, fight with you? I hate the man the same as you do. I could kill him—kill him."

"I think," he said, and the deadly intent of his voice was not lost upon her, "that it will take but the one of us—me. When it's all over, I'll come for you. Promise me that you will stay right here, and wait?"

"I'll wait, I promise," she said, tender once more. "I'll be waiting and praying, Jackie."

Darkness once more settled down over Shut Eye. In his little office in the Blue Eagle, Ken Mark sat staring steadily before him. His gun lay on his knee, a gun that could not have supported the notches of death it had dealt even if its owner had chosen to carve them. He was waiting for Dubois to return with some news from the gang, for he had ordered them all in. As he sat, however, he couldn't know that Dubois, and all the rest of them, for that matter, had left him. He was the last rat in a sinking pirate ship. Loyalty to Ken Mark had been stretched to the limit, and the reputation of the Lobo Ranger was wide spread. At length the waiting man grew impatient and, with a feeling of anticipation, he rose and left the office and the Blue Eagle. It was scarcely flattering to him the sigh of relief that came in the dance hall when he disappeared into the dark street.

Shut Eye had been built at the eastern throat of the valley. At sunset a stiff breeze invariably sprang up and whistled westward toward the open prairie; a breeze that had carried the sounds of battle and the stench of unburied dead from the buttes above the town. Now, as night came and the breeze grew in strength, it bore along the faint odor of wood smoke; very faint at first, but later pungent with the nearness of flames.

A figure that was a part of the darkness, moved swiftly and quietly at the upper end of the street. At times it paused for a brief moment and when it had passed, another thin stream of smoke joined an ever gathering cloud.

In the Blue Eagle Saloon and Dance Hall the patrons were suddenly electrified by a call from the proprietor. Swiftly they answered the call and lined up at the bar. It was seldom that Ken Mark allowed the house to treat any more, and the rare occasions that he did were merely to announce another of his triumphs. Expectantly the crowd filled their glasses and waited for the signal. Mark stood at the end of the bar, near the door of his office, his angular face supporting a seldom seen smile. Those who knew him best, however, missed something of his usual confidence in that smile. Surprise for them he might have, but a surprise that had or would cost him dear.

"Folks," he announced, "we're drinkin', to-night, to the health of a new cashier. She is goin' to take your money from now on, cash your chips, an' smile sweet for you. But remember she's mine, Ken Mark's, an' the first hombre that forgets will remember too late in hell. Here's to Nettie Kelso!" He reached through the door of his office and pulled a pale, defiant girl into the room.

As the glasses were lifted he stooped and swung her up onto the bar. He thrust a glass of liquor into her trembling fingers and gave the signal. Some drank hastily, but others paused to stare at the girl whose clothing was torn and half pulled from her shoulders. They gazed at her eyes that were filled with the fires of defiance; at her small white hand that clutched the whiskey glass spasmodically. Old man Kelso's daughter! The belle of Shut Eye!

In the confusion of drinking and acclaim that followed, a dark figure appeared for a moment at the door of the Blue Eagle. For a moment only it showed, then it melted into the dark again. Few saw it and they gave it no heed. Jack Belmont retreated a step to gain command of his emotions at the sight in the saloon. As he fought the mad desire to rush blindly in, something bumped him from behind. He whirled about, gun ready.

"Nettie?" moaned a voice. "Nettie girl, where are you?" The Lobo Ranger placed a swift hand over Dad Kelso's bleeding mouth.

"Quiet, Dad," he warned. "It's me, Jack. Nettie is in the Blue Eagle, but she won't be there very long."

"I'll kill him, the devil!" shrieked Kelso. "Look what he's done to me. Came to the house a while ago and smashed me with his gun. When I woke up Nettie was gone—he'd taken her."

"I know, I know," cautioned Jack. "But Nettie's all right for a few minutes. Please be quiet and leave it to me." He drew the old man deeper into the shadows and wiped the blood from his eyes. "Can you see, now? Good. Look down the street."

"My God, Jack, it's a fire, the whole street is burnin'!"

"I know it. I set that fire, Dad. I'm burning this nest of skunks out. The far corner of the Blue Eagle is afire right now. I'll make it and the rest of Shut Eye look like my home did that morning out there on the prairie. Now I'm going in after Nettie."

"I'm goin' too, son."

"No; you stay here. If I fail then you can try."

"Please," begged Kelso. "She's my girl, my little Nettie. Let me kill that dirty robber."

"You will stay where you are," said Jack firmly. He drew his gun and dashed for the door.

Nettie Kelso's eyes were wandering hopelessly in search of some means of escape. She saw the bartender suddenly stiffen and reach beneath the bar for his gun. Following his eyes she caught sight of Jack poised in the doorway. The Lobo Ranger had his eyes fastened on the man that held her on the bar with a firm hand. With a cry of warning she dashed her undrained glass of liquor into the bartender's eyes and he dropped to his knees clawing wildly.

Ken Mark saw his enemy just as the first big billow of smoke rolled into the room. Above the cry of "fire," and the mad scramble of the customers for the door, his brain clicked to the situation. The Belmont kid had fired the Blue Eagle and was coming for him. For just a moment the real Ken Mark broke to the surface. The cruel, angular face became almost human in its spasm of fear. Hands that had dealt death fluttered up to a tightened throat. Somewhere behind the pushing crowd, behind that cloud of smoke, was stalking death in the shape of a boy whose parents he had murdered.

Another cloud of smoke billowed in, filling the room and obscuring the door. All of the patrons had gotten clear by this time; only he and the girl were standing at the bar. A cunning born of desperation came to him. Grasping Nettie about the neck with one arm he swung her directly before him and holding her in this position he began a march for the door. Let the Belmont brat shoot now, if he dared! Let him come out from behind the smoke screen and take the slug of lead that was waiting for him!

Near the door he slowed down. Which way had he better turn to keep the girl's body between him and danger? As he hesitated, a clawing hand grasped him from behind and spun him about. Nettie, free for the briefest part of a second, threw herself flat on the floor and wriggled

toward the door. Ken Mark fired while he was still off balance. The hand upon his arm slipped off. Through a rift in the smoke he saw the whiskey blinded, agonized face of his own bartender staring at him, then the man pitched to the floor. Ken Mark stood alone and bewildered in his own burning palace of iniquity.

Flames, now, began to take the place of the smoke. They burst through his office door and licked at the end of the bar. They lighted up the table and were reflected in the polish of the dance floor; they made little waves of heat, like a mirage, at the far end of the room; they made the calm smile of a man standing near the piano grotesquely triumphant.

Ken Mark stared. The Lobo Ranger's hands were by his sides, there was about him an air of confidence that shook the killer's nerve to pieces. He threw up his hands to shut out the sight, choked a curse, then brought down his gun. The two shots were distinctly spaced. One ploughed into the piano with a sharp twang, the other found its mark. Jack Belmont took one last look at the heap upon the floor then dove through a window to safety.

Crowded slowly down the street by the advancing flames were the inhabitants of Shut Eye. At the very rear of the procession were Nettie Kelso and her father. The girl was straining at the arms that led her along; her eyes were wide with terror as they peered into the inferno of fire. Somewhere back there was Jack Belmont, her Jackie. She had heard the two shots but the uncertainty of the results was driving her frantic. At last the red flames wavered and grew dark, she felt herself falling, and then an arm slipped about her waist and she heard a familiar voice say: "All right, Dad, I'll carry her now."

Half an hour later in the cottage among the willows, Jack Belmont tossed a brown envelope onto the table. "It's all there," he said, "every land transaction, every steal of every homestead in this valley. I got it out of Mark's desk. Now what do you folks want to do? Shall we build homes here in the valley or shall we leave?"

Nettie Kelso snuggled into the hollow of his arm and looked up adoringly. "Don't you think," she said, "that it would be nice just to build one home here, one that would be big enough for three——?"

"Well, yes, I reckon so." He grinned slyly and drew her very close.

"Holy hop toads!" exclaimed Dad Kelso peering into the top of the little stove. "Fire every place in Shut Eye but in this stove. Nettie, oh—gosh, build a home big 'nough for five, if yuh want, but first of all let's have some coffee. Danged if I ain't shakin' with a chill, or somethin'."

HOW MANY DEGREES IN A CIRCLE?

IN the early days on the Comstock at Virginia City, Nevada, there were many incidents to lighten the dreary court proceedings. Some of the miners came to grief, according to R. H. Stretch, who was later state mineralogist. He tells of one of these witnesses whose testimony had to be smashed. This is the way the lawyer handled him:

"Captain, you say there was a clay seam in the west cross-cut?"

"Yes, sir."

"And it dipped 60 degrees?"

"Yes, sir."

"Was this from the vertical or the horizontal?"

"From the vertical."

"Captain (as if the questioner were in doubt), how many degrees are there in a circle?"

"Ninety."

"Did you ever see a circle with more than 90 degrees?"

"There might be if it was a very large one—it might run even up to 100 degrees."

"You may step down, Captain."

The Captain stepped.

The Persecution of Percy

By Lupe Loya

Want to laugh, folks? Well, here's a real hearty he-man of a laugh tied up in blue ribbon! Percy, he ain't a Westerner and he ain't a tenderfoot. Gawd—what is he?

WE'VE had some cu-roos characters sojournin' here in Ocatillo at one time an' another, an' for one reason an' another. Bein' sort of off'n the beaten path like it is, the place has a certain fascination for persons that ain't cravin' to be prominent elsewhere. Strained relations with the law is responsible for most of our transient population, an' if it gives the town a bad name outside, it shore makes things interestin' an' lively for them of us who lives here reg'lar an', forms what you might call the backbone of the community.

Like the time when we had two bank presidents, a mail-car bandit, six rustlers an' a bogus Count all hidin' out here, an' passin' the time away playin' poker. They was well matched, an' them games was worth watchin' — at a distance. We was right sorry when a bunch of nosey authorities from here an' there in the northern states come down an' busted up the crowd. An' believe me, they was sorry to go, too. One of the bank presidents broke down an' cried, an' said when he got outta Atlanta he was comin' back here permanent. I bet he will, too.

But not all the newcomers that drops in on us hurried-like is afraid of publicity. Some of 'em positively courts it, an' such a one was Percy Purdue. Yessir. That was his real name, Percy, an' it shows you what sort of a feller he was that he didn't grab the chance to change it, him bein' an ontire stranger in these parts an' nobody the wiser about that handle of his'n if he hadn't give it out plumb brazen the day he registered at the hotel. It didn't seem so strange, though, after we found out what he was, which was a pote. Now I ain't posin' as no critic of the litterary perfeshion, nor have I anything against po'try or potes as such; but when a tender nurtured lily like Percy comes steamin' out here an' sets hisself up as the Virile Voice of the Cow Country, it jest natcherally rouses ire an' resentment.

The first we knew about the outrage was when Percy hisself started braggin' about it, and began showin' around a magazine with one of his pomes printed in it. The pome was called "Six-Gun Sal," an' underneath was printed "by Percy Purdue," an' underneath that, "The Virile Voice of the Cow Country."

Now as before stated, I don't hold it against no man that he's afflicted with the

po'try itch—he cain't no more help it than he can help bow legs or a squint. But when a hombre named Percy that don't know the difference between the cantle an' the pommel of a saddle, starts advertisin' hisself as a cow country pote, he's in for some rough handlin' an' no mistake. An' what made it worse was that jest about this time the town was cravin' excitement, nothin' much havin' happened since that Chicago gunman who was with us for a while got restless one day an' shot up the village with a machine-gun.

I hadn't felt especially drawed to Percy from the start, but I shore felt nervous for him when the bunch of hell-raisin' buckaroos that hangs around town durin' the slack season begun talkin' low an' earnest about what's the best way to put him outta his misery. Before he drifts in an' starts diffusin' po'try, this crowd had got their fun outta fightin' among theirselves, argyin' as to which had the purplest past an' the closest squeaks from stretchin' hemp in consequence. But when this Percy dewdrop lights in their midst, all pussenal feuds an' differences is forgotten while they concentrates on makin' life excitin' for him. An' bein' sort of talented that-away, each an' every one a expert in devilment, you might say, it wasn't long before the Virile Voice was emittin' yelps of anguish.

Among other things they done was to stage a shootin' scrape in the bar of the hotel. Percy was there, all dressed up in his new angora chaps an' a lavender silk shirt, lappin' up local color an' sarsparilla simultaneous. The way he went around with a little book jottin' down impressions of this an' that, was another quaint habit of his'n that endeared him to the boys. He was jest so plumb tickled with everything that he couldn't get it all writ down fast enough.

"Why, it's corking! Perfectly corking!" he'd say, lookin' over the crowd, an' then he'd flop down in the nearest chair an' try to make a sketch of Slim Gustafsen's boots, or Pinto Bronson's two gallon hat; an' I suppose that night he'd write a pome about 'em.

Well, on the evenin' I'm referrin' to, the talk had got around to the good old days when somebody got shot up pret' near every night. Some of the yarns was true, but most of 'em was manufactured on the spur of the moment to impress Percy, an' he shore was impressed! He was hangin' on everybody's words, his eyes bulged out like a Pekinese pup's, an' he like to got writer's cramp tryin' to get it all down in his book.

Slim an' Pinto started the argyment, an' I guess they had it all planned out beforehand. Anyways, they begun cussin' each other, an' the next thing I knew was when I heard a coupla shots in there an' went in to investigate. It sounded like hell had broke loose by the time I got there. Everybody seemed to be shootin' at everybody else, an', not knowin' they was usin' blanks, I was some agitated for a minnit or two.

I don't stand for no shootin' in my hotel, an' several killin's have been indefinitely postponed because the boys know how I feel about gun-totin' on my premises. But Slim give me the wink an' I soon reelized that it was all for Percy's benefit. When the smoke cleared, six hombres was playin' dead an' our pote was the color of a turnip that's been dug up too soon. He had both his guns out—yep, he packed no less'n two—an' he was standin' in a corner shakin' like a baby aspen. I didn't discover till the next day that he'd shot one of the glass eyes out of the moose-head over the bar an' drilled a hole through the "Smile, Damn You, Smile!" motter behind the cash register. At the time, I was too busy holdin' him up an' tryin' to keep my face straight to notice them details.

The firin' had hardly ceased before Sheriff Muggins come tearin' up the street, an' busts into the place.

"Leave them corpses be!" he yells to the boys who was haulin' the deceased out by the heels. "Don't you know no better than to tamper with the evidence before it's hardly got cold? Lay off'n them dead men, an' line yerselves up against the wall there!"

Then he ketches sight of Percy, droopin' like a broken reed, with his two gats still wobblin' in his hands.

"Ah, ha!" says the sheriff, glarin' at him like a Gila Monster. "I guessed it the first time I laid eyes on ye! Boys, this here imitation pote is none other than the Yazoo Kid, wanted in three States for everything from murder to hoss-stealin'! I got a notice to be on the lookout for him, an' by the way he handled his weapons I suspected he was our man, but I couldn't be sure! Look here, he's mowed down six of 'em—six of our foremost citizens! Boys, are we goin' to stand for it? We ain't had a good hangin' in a year or two! What say we save the authorities up Nawth there the expense of a trial?"

With that he whips a "Wanted" bill outta his pocket, an' the boys crowd round to look at it.

"He shore is the Yazoo Kid!" says Slim, shakin' his head. "Who woulda thunk it!"

By this time Pinto had edged over to where me an' Percy is standin' or ruther, where I'm standin' an' Percy is drapped.

"Sperrit him outta here, quick!" hisses Pinto. "I'll keep the rest covered while you get him out—through the back door!"

"But I ain't the Yazoo Kid!" bleats Percy. "It's all a terrible mistake! An' I didn't kill more'n two of these men, because I only fired twice."

At that Pinto doubles up like he'd been hit with a brick, an' I knew if I didn't get Percy outta there pronto somebody would give the show away by laffin' out loud. So I grabs one of his cannons, and, between us, me an' Pinto manages to hold the bloodthirsty crowd at bay an' get the prisoner over to the jail. There we removes his armament, which consists of a coupla bowie knives besides the six-guns, the hull outfit so new it squeaks.

"We'll stand guard outside," I tells Percy. "The only way they can get at ye is over our dead bodies! When the excitement dies down I'll get ye outta town!"

So that was how I happened to farm Percy out to the Solanos on the Crazy J Ranch. It never dawned on me at the time that events would shape up as they did. Fac' is, I forgot all about Lola Solano when I hit on the Crazy J as Percy's refuge. But they say marriages is made in heaven, so I guess mebbe I'm not entirely responsible; he prob'ly would have met the girl anyhow. The main reason I thought of old man Solano was that he liked a joke so much, an' bein' crippled up with rheumatiz like he is, he don't get in on the town fun very often.

I rode out to the ranch the next day, an' tipped him off what was comin' up. It was then that I saw Lola, who had growed up considerable since the last time I'd run inter her. She's old Fred's grandchild, an' if they make 'em any prettier, why I ain't never happened to see one. Way back somewheres the Solanos had some Spanish in 'em—just enough to give Lola hair like a raven's wing an' big black eyes that sets the heart of even a old-timer like me thumpin' a quickstep.

"Hullo, Uncle Bill!" she calls out to me when I ride up to the stoop. "For Heaven's sake come in an' talk to grandpappy! He's as cranky to-day as a wet hen!"

So I went in an' told 'em about Percy, an' they had a good laff over it. The old man said as how he'd shore enjoy havin' a tenderfoot pote around the place to amuse him, an' Lola admitted that the board money would come in right handy since the drouth had hit the ranch so hard.

"I've explained to Percy," I tell them, "that it's safer for him to hide out here at the Crazy J than to try to get plumb outta the country at present on account of the excitement runnin' so high. Seems there's a four thousand dollar reward up for this fugitive Yazoo Kid, dead or alive, an' he thinks that somebody's liable to shoot him on sight on account of him bein' the spittin' image of the outlaw."

The next night me an' Pinto staged a realistic jail-break for our charge. We pertended like we had to cut the bars in one of the winders, an' we lifted Percy through this aperture wrapped in a Injun blanket, an' after considerable tense excitement, managed to flivver him out to the ranch. He give us each a long, hard handclasp at partin'.

"Boys," he says, "I know you risked your lives to do this, an' I'll never forget it!" he says. "I'll immortalize you both, in verse."

It sounded kinda dangerous, but we knew he didn't mean no harm by it, him bein' too wrought up to think what he was sayin'.

"After things quiet down," I says to him, "an' I can get the sheriff to listen to me, I'll explain about the mistake. But, with feelin' runnin' so high right now, it wouldn't be safe for you to get within shootin' distance of that town bunch. Until they find out for shore that you ain't the Yazoo Kid, you'll have to lay low."

"Besides, there's those two or more pore fellers I accidentally killed the other night," said Percy, with a sad shake of his head. "Even after they find out I'm not the Kid I suppose I'll have to stand trial."

"Don't have nothin' to say about it an' it'll blow over in a few weeks," I told him. "They prob'ly needed killin' anyway."

We left him there in the Crazy J corral, lookin' kinda small an' pitiful an' forlorn in the moonlight. I felt kinda mean about it after we started back to town, but Pinto reminded me that if we hadn't got the pore dub outta the village somethin' might have happened to him. So we left it at that, an' after a few days I forgot all about him, an' he didn't come inter my mind again until one day about a month later when a mighty pretty girl comes ridin' up the street, causin' so much neck-cranin' an' general excitement that she like to have stopped traffic. I was settin' on the sidewalk in front of the hotel, an' when she got a little closer I reckernized her as Lola Solano.

"Hullo, Uncle Bill!" she says to me, hoppin' off her hoss. "Can I have a few words in private with you?"

Well, there wasn't a thing around there that Lola couldn't have had; an' me, I was considerable set up to be singled out that-a-way for the young lady's confidence. I've knowed her sence she was knee-high to a horntoad.

"Uncle Bill," she says to me when we got inside, "I wish you'd come out to the ranch an' talk to Percy!, That pore boy is broodin' over them murders he thinks he committed, an' it's makin' him des'prit. He don't say nothin' about it, but I know that's what's the matter with him."

"Percy?" I says, blankly. Then I remembered our pote. "Oh *him!*" I says. "Is that sprig of poison ivy still pollutin' the atmosphere out there? I thought we'd scared him plumb outta the country."

"Please don't speak that-a-way about Mr. Purdue," says Lola, and her face got all pink and flustered. "As for bein' scared, there's nothin' he's scared of! That's what worries me. He jest flirts with death an' disaster all the time. The other day he picked a rattler up by the neck an' brought it inside to show grandpappy. Like to scared grandpappy inter a fit! An' he's got Sing Lee so tamed that that Chink will eat outta his hand—an' none of the rest of us darin' to go near the kitchen! An' yesterday he rode Cockeye! Yessir! 'Course Cockeye didn't happen to be in a pitchin' mood, but if he had been—"

"*Percy?*" I broke in, incredulous. "You mean to say *he* forked that buckin' terror an' lived to tell the tale?"

"Yep," says Lola, solemn. "I've begged him almost on my bended knees not to try it again."

"Oh, you have," I says, lookin' at her an' marvellin' as I always have done, at the peculiar workin' of the female mind. "Am I to understand by that that you've went an' got attached to that ink-slingin' mistake? If I thought I had been the cause of inflictin' *him* on you—"

"Don't worry!" interrupts Lola, kinda bitter. "He cain't see me for dust! It ain't that. It's jest that bein' our boarder an' all, I feel kinda responsible for him."

"Oh," says I. "Well, if it's them murders that's preyin' on his mind, why don't you tell him it was jest a little joke? All six of them corpses is settin' out on the stoop right now; tell him you seen 'em, an' he don't need to worry no more."

"Say, you don't know Percy very well, do you?" says Lola, scornful. "Why, if he guessed that you all had made a fool of him like that why he'd come in an' clean up the town! No, I don't dare tell him! Even it we could spare Pinto as well as not, *you're* too young to die, Uncle Bill, an' I like you besides. Some other way will have to be found."

Well, the upshot of it was I promised to go out to the ranch the first chance I got an' study Percy's case first hand. I was considable cu-roos to see what had come over the kid, too, an' not quite easy in my conscience. It was bad enough to think of Lola fallin' in love with him when he was in his right mind, but if his brain had been turned by the scare we give him it was even worse. An' it shore looked like he'd gone loco if it was true what Lola said about his not bein' able to see her for dust. That was the part about it that sounded fishy to me.

But before I got around to go out there, somethin' happened that took my mind plumb off'n the subject. That was the bank hold-up at Barnardo, a town on the railroad coupla hundred miles north. It was the most darin' daylight robbery that had took place in these parts for a number of years, an' bein' a deputy, I was called on to join the posse Sheriff Muggins organized. Seems a lone bandit entered the bank jest before closin' time, stuck up the two cashiers an' the customers that happened to be in there, locked 'em in the vault, an' headed south with the payroll.

It looked like a cinch to ketch him, because he on'y had a two hour start, an' ridin' hell for leather he couldn't make the border in less'n five. The railroad offered a big reward, an' we wanted it; an' we figgered we'd get it, too, because the Palomas crossin' country was where he was bound to head for, on account of the river runnin' between steep cañon walls for fifty miles or so except right there at the crossin'.

Muggins had his men strung out in a drag-net, workin' in pairs. Me an' Pinto was together, an' our orders was to comb the Roarin' Devil Creek country. Besides our crowd, the rangers had a big posse, too, but they was more bunched, an' patrolin' the river. Pinto an' me figgered we had a pretty good beat, on account of the box cañons around Roarin' Devil. If we could get our outlaw bottled up in one of them, we'd be settin' nice. We kinda had a hunch that he'd make for that section too.

Well, we was out where we wanted to be by sunup, an' was jest settling down to take forty winks by turns, when all of a sudden Pinto yells to me to look what's comin', an' I roused up to see a rider comin' across country right towards us at breakneck speed. In less time than it takes to tell it, this rider reins up with a jerk in front of us an' we see it's a girl, an' then, underneath the dust on her face, I see it's Lola Solano.

"For the love of Pete, Lola!" I yells at her. "What are you doin' out here? This ain't no place for a girl to be roamin' around unchappyroned! Don't you know they's a outlaw—"

"Oh, Uncle Bill!" she says, in a voice that sounds like she's about to cry. "It's Percy! I know it was Percy that held up the bank!"

At first we thought the pore girl had a touch of the heat, an' we got her off her hoss, an' give her some water an' started fannin' her with our hats. But she got right down impatient with us for treatin' her that-a-way.

"I'm all right!" she says, half-cryin'. "An' you've got to listen to me! I tell you, I know Percy has gone an' done this terrible thing, an' I'll tell you why! Two nights ago me an' Percy was settin' out in the moonlight, an'—well, we got to talkin' about how beautiful everything was, an'—well, Percy—Percy told me he loved me!"

With that she put her head down in her hands an' started to cry. I shore felt sorry for the kid. Me an' Pinto patted her on the shoulder, not bein' able to show our sympathy no other way, an' pretty soon she pulled herself together an' went on:

"'But,' Percy says to me, 'I cain't ask you to marry me, Lola, because there's blood on my hands! I'm a murderer!' he says. 'I'm a des'prit character!' An' before I could stop him, he jumped up out of the swing an' rushed away. I couldn't find him no more that evenin', an' in the mornin' he wasn't in his room an' we found he'd gone off—on Cockeye!"

"On Cockeye?" I says. "Lola are you *shore*?"

They ain't more'n three men in this country that's been able to ride that catastrophe, an' I jest couldn't believe that Percy could have done it.

"Yes, Cockeye!" says the girl. "He seems to have put the Indian sign on the hoss same as he done on the Chink—an' me. I love him, Uncle Bill! An' now I suppose he'll be killed, or else locked up for life!"

"But Lola, why do you think Percy would want to hold up a bank?" Pinto wants to know, grinnin' in spite of hisself at the idea of our pote pullin' off a thing like that.

"Because he said he was des'prit!" says Lola. "He said he was goin' to end it all some way, an' he didn't care how! He thinks he's a second Billy the Kid, an' he wants to go out in a blaze of blood an' glory. He thinks—"

She stopped sudden, an' points up the gulch. Then she jumped to her feet an' give a kinda scream. Pinto an' me turned around, an' then we see what she saw. Ridin' pell-mell down through the brush was a man in a lavender shirt an' white chaps. Even at that distance there was no mistakin' Percy's get-up.

The rider couldn't see us yet, but at the sound of that scream he reined in like a shot, an' sat like a statute, starin' all around him. Before I could ketch her, Lola had made one leap for her hoss, an' no sooner had she got in sight than a pistol report rang out. It missed her by a foot I guess, judgin' by the sound. By the time I was mounted, Percy had swung around an' was tearin' back up the gulch. Pinto was already mounted an' in pursuit, but when he got to the top of a little rise he yelled to me to look behind. There was a big cloud of dust comin' up from the river, an' I could make out about twenty men, the rangers' patrol, ridin' like bats outta hell. They had heard the shot.

My first thought was to overtake Lola. It didn't seem to matter to her that Percy had fired at her, an' she was goin' after him jest as hard as she could go. By the time I caught up with her the bandit was outta sight, headed up a side gulch, which was the head of Spring Creek.

"Keep that posse back!" was her first words to me. "Let me talk to him first, Uncle Bill, an' I can save him. Oh, help me, help me! They'll kill Percy!"

I rode along side of her tryin' to soothe her an' to get her to turn back, because it shore looked to me like Percy was destined to stop a lot of lead in the next fifteen or twenty minutes.

"They ain't goin' to kill him unless they have to," I told her. "An' anyways he'd be better dead than as crazy as he is! Now you come on back with me like a good girl!"

But of course she wouldn't. The gulch was narrowin' by this time an' the other bunch wasn't far behind us. It was kinda a skittish situation any way you looked at it. I expected Percy to start firin' at us from behind some rock almost any second; or, if he passed us up, that he'd start shootin' at the posse—an' we all knew what *that* would mean. What I was hopin' was that we could overtake him an' maybe overcome him without bloodshed, in which case I could do some subsequent explainin' that would save a lot of grief.

We pounded on up the gulch, Pinto a coupla laps behind us. An' then, all of a sudden, we rounded a big rock into a little parklike space with a spring bubblin' up amongst the grass. An' sittin' on a rock with his feet in the water, an' in nothin' but his B. V. D.'s was our Percy! Coupla feet away, trussed up like a pig for market, was a hombre in Percy clothes. Cockeye was standin' nearby nibblin' the grass, an' beside him was a saddle with the cinches busted. On up the gulch apiece was another hoss, all in.

Percy made a jump outta the water an' grabs the saddle blanket which he drapes around his shrinkin' form as far as it would go.

"Lola!" he says. "Lola!" An' even with the sun glintin' on his hornrim specks I could see a tender meltin' look in his eyes.

In two seconds she was off'n her horse an' with her arms around his neck, while he patted her shoulder with his free hand an' hung on to the saddle blanket like grim death. About that time the rest of the

posse caught up with us, but they was more interested in the trussed up man in the lavender shirt, than they was in our pote.

"I think he's dead, or unconscious," Percy informs them, when they roll this hombre over on his face. "Cockeye bucked him off an' he lit on his head. I tied him up jest as a precaution. He seemed a rough sort of fellow. In fact he stole my clothes," he adds, with a blush.

Bill Tennant, the ranger captain, was comparin' the captive with the picture on a bill he'd pulled outta his pocket.

"Boys," he says, "it's the Yazoo Kid shore enough! I kinda figgered it was him that did that bank job!"

Then he grabbed Percy by the hand.

"I don't know who you are, young feller," he says, "but congratulations are shore in order for this piece of work you've done! You've hauled in about five thousand dollars in rewards of one kind and another! An' you deserve 'em, too, for the most brilliant single-handed capture of a desp'rite character that I've ever come across!"

Percy give him a long, blank look while his mind struggled to take it all in. That name 'Yazoo Kid' had awakened painful memories in him. Then he squared his shoulders an' pushed the hair outta his eyes.

"Why it's really nothin' at all, Captain," he says. "Not for me! You know I killed six of 'em the other night in the hotel bar with two shots! I'm the Virile Voice of the Cow Country! Plumb deadly!"

Well, we led him away after that, an' later on, when he got back to normal again, we got the hull story outta him. Seems he was moseyin' along down the gulch early that mornin' bound for the border, when along comes the outlaw.

Percy sighted him 'bout half a mile back an' thinkin' it was somebody pursuin' him pussenal, he beats it up the side cañon where we later found him. But to his horror the bandit comes right along after him, an' the next thing Percy knew he was covered by a big forty-five.

"I want your clothes an' your hoss, an' I want 'em quick!" says the Yazoo Kid.

There didn't seem to be much use argyin' with him, so Percy complies, prompt, to the first request.

"But I'd advise you not to take the hoss," he says. "He's particular about who rides him."

"Oh, is *that* so!" says the Kid, peelin' off his clothes an' substitutin' Percy's. "Well, we'll see about that!"

But when he went to mount Cockeye he couldn't get within six feet of him; might as well have tried to climb on a buzz-saw. So after relievin' his mind with considerable swearin', an' takin' a pot shot at the hoss an' missin' him, he jumped on his own tired nag an' starts back down the gulch.

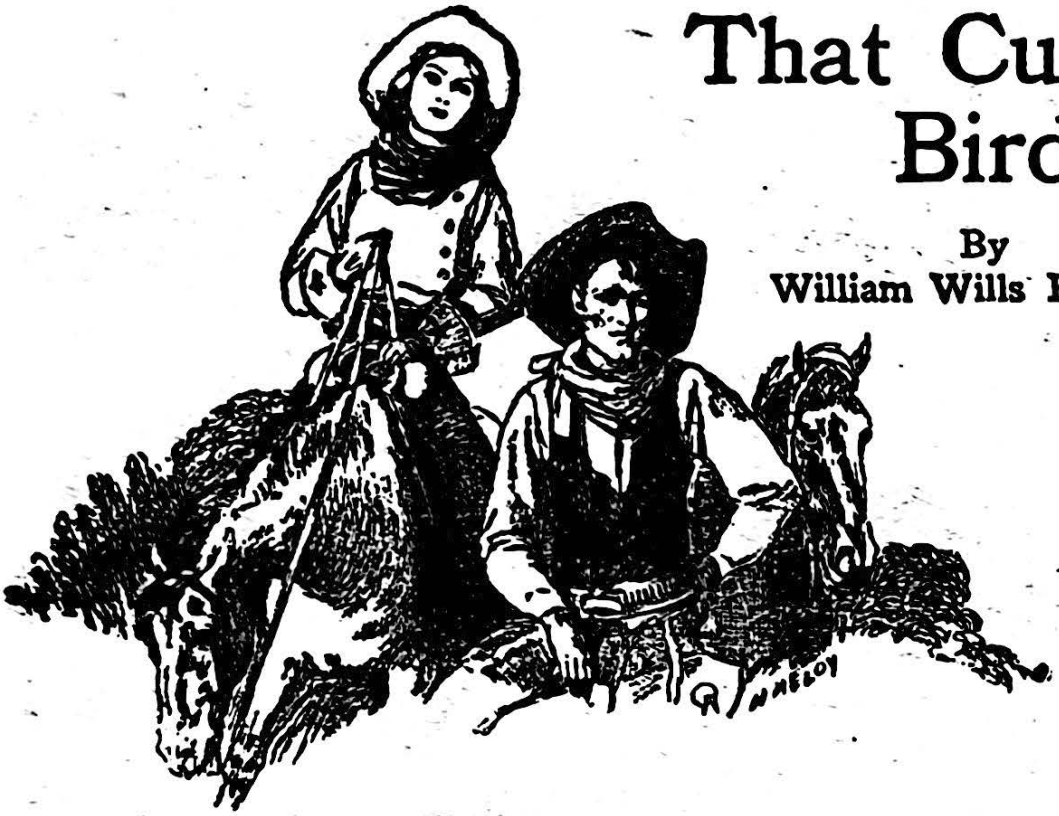
It wasn't no time at all after that our hero, who had decided he might as well settle down for a little rest beside the spring, heard a shot. An' a few minnits afterwards back come the bandit, ridin' like the devil was on his trail. This time he didn't waste no words, but flopped off'n his sweatin', heavin' hoss an' made a flyin' leap for Cockeye, so sudden that the bucker was took by surprise.

Accordin' to Percy he actually got into the saddle before the fireworks commenced, but he didn't stay there long. Cockeye give a couple of snorts an' started sunfishin', an' when the dust settled the bandit was sprawled *hors de combat* on the ground with the saddle on top of him. After which Percy roped him, in case he comes to, sudden, an' was sittin' there thinkin' up a pome to commemorate the incident, when the rest of us arrived.

We made him Mayor of Ocatillo at the next election, an' he was so busy with his civic duties that he give up po'try writin' almost altogether. The last one he wrote, I think, was to celebrate the arrival of little Percy Solano Purdue, an' both him an' Lola is convinced that not only the child but the pome is a masterpiece.

That Cupid Bird

By
William Wills Bradford



It was the bird who first surprised Hugh up at his line shack. Then he discovered the girl and her keeper. From then on, surprises stampeded fast and furious on each other's heels, and Hugh wasn't the only one caught in the stampede.

"SPEAKIN' of the element of surprise," said old Joe Smith, pulling at his draggled mustache and eyeing a dusty youth humorously, "reminds me—"

"How in tarnation was I to know that old fool had a buck left in him?" demanded the youth. He dusted his chaps with a pair of gloves and watched the capture of the ancient cowpony that had just unseated him. "Why, the sway-backed old son of a turtle just hunched right up an' dumped me afore I knew it. That just goes to show—"

"That you can't tell nothin' about a horse. Nor neither can you tell anything about a woman, or about anything in the world, for that matter. It's the element of surprise in everything that upsets the free an' easy-goin' existence of us mortals here on this earth. Which reminds me of Hugh Paxton, which same top-hand cowpuncher got more'n his share of the surprise element not so long back."

"Hugh Paxton?" The youth fished out the makings of a cigarette and twirled a smoke. "Ain't he the owner of that big Flat Z Ranch up Catmints way?"

"That's him," nodded old Joe. "There was a time not so long ago when he was just a plain buckaroo like you an' me; but that was before this here element of surprise I been tellin' you about got in its licks."

Both men settled on the top bar of the corral. Old Joe bit off a generous chew of "flat," worked it into a comfortable position back of a leathery cheek, and began.

HUGH PAXTON was just a good line rider for the Double T at the beginnin' of that summer. The Double T didn't put up much hay, as most of its range lay in the hills where there was plenty of protection from winter storms. The spring roundup had finished and Hugh was ridin' line way up to the north edge of the range. There wasn't much for him to do except keep a general tally on the beef an' see that they didn't wander too far north.

Things had been purty peaceful for the Double T since they'd cleaned out the Walpole gang of rustlers. Hugh had taken a leadin' part in that sashay, an' it was hard for him to calm down after so

much excitement. Livin' alone in a shack twenty miles from the home ranch was a right tame occupation after baggin' three out of the five rustlers for himself. He was young, an' craved plenty of action, so you can see that it didn't rest easy on his soul to be shunted off alone that-a-way. "Guardian of the slab orchard," he called his job, referrin' to the lay of that particular country which was mostly slab rock an' sage. He used to complain that even the rattlers were unsociable up there.

The shack wasn't really no shack whatever; it was fixed up right smart for its purpose. There was two rooms to it; right nice rooms, too, an' they had been furnished with some of the best stuff at the home ranch. It had a good roof, good walls an' good floors, in fact it was the best line shack in the State, bar none. The boss had allowed to make up for the lonesome job by riggin' a prairie palace for the sucker that got the north ticket. It was well stocked with grub, too, which would of plumb suited me as I'm a eatin' man, y'know. For water, there was one of the purtiest creeks you ever saw that come a-hustlin' down out of a canyon. Clear an' cold it was, an' deep enough in spots to cover your sizzlin' skin on a hot day.

Well, nice as the place was, Hugh didn't cotton much to it. As I say, he craved action an' sociability. Consequence was, he used to spend as much as a week with one of the other line riders for some other outfit. Mebbe the other hombre lived thirty miles away, which same didn't make no difference to Hugh, him cravin' companions that-a-way. Sometimes one of the other fellas came to stay with Hugh for a spell, but the ultra plus accommodations of the shack by the creek worked on their sense of fitness so that they wouldn't linger long.

The first spasm of this element of surprise I'm tellin' you about came when Hugh was comin' home to his shack after a ten days' ramble up in the high hills. It's about six o'clock in the evenin' when he tops a hill a quarter of a mile from the shack. He pauses to contemplate the beauties of the shadows down in the valley an' to ruminate upon the lonesome night he is about to spend in the shack. Hugh's gray eyes were always purty wide, but they opened up somethin' scand'lous when he sees smoke comin' from the shack chimney. While he's wonderin' who the visitor might be, a figure walks out of the door an' looks around.

Like whippin' out a gun Hugh swings his cattle glasses down the hill and ranges 'em on the figure. In a minute his jaw opens as wide as his eyes, for the figure is a girl. Hugh slides off'n his horse an' gets out of sight pronto, then he takes another look through the glasses.

The girl is mighty handsome, bein' medium tall an' well rounded; but there's a drawn look on her face, a sort of a pale desperateness in her features, that sort of spoils the picture. Hugh watches her as she gazes in all directions, somethin' like a bird that ain't exactly sure which way to fly. Finally, with a hopeless wave of her arms, she turns back into the shack, leavin' Hugh to watch the smoke at the chimney an' speculate a heap as to what it's all about.

Hugh is generally a fast thinker, but this deal had kinda got him stumped. He sits up there on that hill for two hours tryin' to figure out whether to go down an' see things closer or to fan it for the home ranch with the news. At last, when it's dusky in the valley, he forks his hoss an' eases slowly down the hill. He's made up his mind he'll just ride past for a look-see, then beat it on in to tell his boss.

When he gets nearer to the shack he can see a light burnin' in the bigger room, but there ain't no voices to be heard. It didn't seem no wise likely that a purty girl would be stayin' in that house all alone, an' the fact that this is plumb evident arouses his curiosity complete. He gets up right near the door, walkin' his hoss quiet-like, an' stops to consider once more. Whilst in this attitude, there comes a blood-curdlin' cry from inside the shack. Hugh goes as stiff as a brandin' iron at the sound an' reaches for his gun.

"Don't you dare kiss me, you brute! Stop it! Help—help!"

As I've said, Hugh was a fast actor. In

a little less than nothin' flat, he's off his hoss an' plungin' through the door of the shack. He pulls up short just inside, his gun all cocked an' ready to deal out its dose of lead. But there's nothin' to shoot at! Sittin' before him in a couple of the best chairs is two women; one, the girl he saw outside, the other an older woman with a hawk-like beak and cold eyes. It's her that looks up from a magazine an' penetrates Hugh's flustered face with a razor-like look.

"Well," she says, layin' down her book, "just what is the idea of this intrusion?"

Hugh gulps rapid an' looks first at one then the other. "I—I heard somebody hollerin' for help," he mumbles. "Must of been mistaken."

"Ha, ha, ha!" laughs a voice from a corner. "I fooled you—fooled you!"

"Shut up!" snapped the older woman an' got up to put a cloth over the cage of a parrot. "You heard the bird," she said, turnin' back to Hugh. "He gets one of those fool tantrums once in a while."

"You're a liar," came in muffled tones from the cage.

"Excuse me," says Hugh, lowerin' his gun an' backin' toward the door. "When I heard such voices comin' from my own shack I thought it was time to see what it was."

"Oh," the hawk-faced one says. "You must be Mister Paxton."

"That's me," admits Hugh. There was a lot more he could of said, such as "what the hell you doin' in my place," an' such; but he was too baffled by the element of surprise to think of it. He just keeps on backin' toward the door with the woman followin' him. Her face has kind of eased off its hard look by this time, an' she pulls a sort of a smile. Outside the door she steps up to him quick an' lays a hand on his arm.

"Mister Paxton," she says in a low voice, "you're prob'ly surprised to come home and find two women in your house." Hugh had to admit that he was some taken aback. "You will excuse my reception of you when you read this note from the owner of the Double T. It will explain our presence."

By the light comin' out of the window Hugh read the note from Phil Lander. It explained that the lady and her niece were to occupy the cabin so long as they might need it, and that he, Hugh, could either bunk out in a tent or come home to the ranch. The niece was in a bad way, mentally, from overstudy at school, and the life she had been leading in Eastern society.

"There's nothing violent about her," says the hawk-nosed aunt as he finishes the note, "she just has those spells when she isn't just right. I have brought her out here where it is quiet and peaceful; the doctors have ordered it."

Hugh began to understand and to pity the girl. He remembered how pale she looked sittin' there in the chair; that flash of fear on her face when he came bustin' in with his gun all set. "I reckon I did wrong when I crashed in a minute ago," he says. "That didn't help her trouble none."

"We can excuse you this time. That parrot is an old pet of mine or I would never have brought him along. He's really a nuisance at times. Now, I expect we could put you up for a night. You were expecting to stay here, weren't you?"

"Yeah; but I'll fan it on to the ranch; it's only twenty miles." Hugh would have rode all night rather than stay in that shack with two women. "I'll bring out a tent to-morrow."

"I'm so sorry," she says, warmin' up when she finds he won't stay.

The shack door opens an' the girl stands there in the light. She's still pale an' hopeless lookin' an' she stares at Hugh with big, wonderin' eyes.

"Nellie," snaps the hawk nose, "get right back inside!" The girl flinches like she'd been hit an' backs out of sight. Hugh had a sudden feelin' like he'd like to choke the creature standin' near him, but he drowns it an' says good-night, polite-like.

He don't get much sleep that night what with the ride an' findin' a bunk to sleep in. He's up early next mornin' an' hunts up his boss.

"I was expectin' you to come in," says

Phil Lander. "Kind of a rotten trick, turnin' them women loose in your shack; but what could I do after I'd seen the girl's condition? I met up with 'em in town, an' after hearin' the story I told 'em they could have the line shack."

"I'm takin' a tarp back with me to-day," says Hugh. "I can camp up the canyon a ways an' sort of keep an eye out for 'em. The girl don't look none too well, an' I don't know as I could blame her, livin' with that ol' buzzard."

"It's funny," says Phil scratchin' his head, "but I kinda got the same idee about that woman. Well, mebbe it's just her way; people that's off in the head have to be handled pretty firm, sometimes, an' that may account for her treatment of the girl."

Hugh catches up a pack hoss an' loads it with the tarp an' a mess of supplies, then he heads back toward the shack. He arrives sometime after noon an' locates a place to camp about half way up the hill from the cabin. He's just spreadin' his tarp when he hears a cry an' sees the girl runnin' up the hill toward him. Her hair is flyin' an' she's runnin' like seven devils is after her. Hugh drops the tarp an' goes to meet her.

"Oh, Mister Paxton!" she pants. "I—I—"

"There, now, Nellie," comforts Hugh—he don't know her other name.

She stands there pantin' an' lookin' back down the hill. Hugh don't savvy the trouble unless it's one of her spells, so he takes her by the arm an' starts leadin' her back to the cabin. Ol' Hawk-nose pops outa the shack about that time an' comes a-scamperin' their way. When the girl sees her, she starts cryin' an' hangs onto Hugh's arm tight.

When the aunt joins 'em it's plain to see she's fightin' mad, but she calms herself an' smiles knowin'-like at Hugh. "I'm glad you understand," she says to Hugh. "She has these spells quite often. She'll be all right in a little while."

Hugh watches her lead the girl back to the shack. He feels that same wave of pity for the girl come over him again. While she does act sort of funny, there's a look of terror in her big eyes that to him is genuine. He shakes his head an' goes back to his outfit.

Later that evenin', he walks down to the cabin to get a spare skillet an' a coffee pot. This time he knocks at the door an' waits a minute while he hears a scurryin' inside. Purty quick a voice yells: "Come on in, you bum. Come in!" He shoves the door open an' the same voice cackles, "Fooled you that time. Fooled you. Hah!"

The girl is sittin' in the same chair an' the aunt is coverin' the parrot's cage. "Naughty Polly," says Hawk-nose. "You shouldn't say such things." She turns to Hugh an' emits a sigh. "Incorrigible, this parrot; I don't know what to do with him. He's almost human."

"Even to smokin' cigarettes?" asks Hugh, pointin' to a tailor-made smoke that's still burnin' on a stand near the cage. "An' does he wear man's gloves an' a hat?" These same articles were in plain sight on the floor.

For a minute Hawk-nose eyes him plumb wicked, then she smiles her most charmin' smile. "Just another peculiarity of Polly," she says. "The bird thinks so much of my husband that he won't quiet down at night without seeing his hat and gloves near by and smell one of his cigarettes burning. Odd, isn't it?"

Just how odd Hugh thought it was he didn't say. He got his skillet an' coffee pot an' goes back to his shake-down. But he does a heap of ruminatin' that night, layin' out there under the stars. Somehow he can't bring himself to trust the ol' buzzard that's guardin' the girl.

The next day when he's circlin' the hills south of the shack, he comes upon one of them tin automobeels standing behind a rock that's near an old trail to town. The car ain't more'n a mile from the cabin, an' when he sees it his eyes pop open in surprise. Examinin' the tracks of it, he decides they ain't much over a day old, an' when he looks the thing over he discovers two or three cigarette butts the same as the one he saw by the parrot's cage. This spread starts him to thinkin' more'n ever, an' he don't ride far from the shack that day.

Along about midnight that night, he's layin' on his tarp still thinkin' when somethin' white looms outa the dark an' runs up to him. He ain't much surprised this time to discover it's the girl. She's dressed only in her night clothes, an' shiverin' from the chill an' fright. Hugh sets her down an' wraps a blanket about her while she gets her breath.

"Mr. Paxton," she begins after a little, "please, won't you believe me? I know it sounds absurd and looks funny, but—" Here she starts to cry.

"Easy, now, Nellie," says Hugh. "I'll listen this time, an'—I reckon I'll believe you."

"I'm not unbalanced like that woman says, not crazy at all. I've been kidnapped!"

"What?"

"My name," she goes on breathlessly, "is Nell Parker, daughter of J. Ogden Parker, president of the Parker Packing Company of Chicago. I was kidnapped two weeks ago from a house party in Evanston by two men and that woman down there. They've threatened to kill me if I try to communicate with or tell anyone about it. You don't know what I've suffered at their hands. I'll really go insane if—if—"

"Won't your pa pay 'em the ransom?"

"*Pay?* He's already paid them, but they didn't keep their word and moved me out here to this place so that they could get more money from him. Please, won't you help me?"

Hugh's chest has been gettin' tighter an' tighter as he listened. Plain cattle rustlin' couldn't hold a patch to a deal like this. The girl sets there shiverin' in his arms an' waitin' breathless for him to say he would. She didn't know Hugh's particular brand of fire made it hard for him to speak.

"Help you?" he says husky-like. "I'll tell the world I will."

With that she crumples up on his bosom an' begins to sob. Hugh pats her shoulder an' tries to comfort her in the ways he knows.

"You say there's two men an' the woman?"

"Yes; and they are all mean and desperate. I think they are part of some Chicago gang. They'll shoot or knife if they get the chance. Please don't bother them; just get me away."

"I think it'll be a little of both," says Hugh grimly. He thinks right rapid for a minute. "I know a cave up this canyon a ways that they can't find. I'll hide you in it an' then come back to settle with the gang. I ain't had a fight for a month an' I'd kinda enjoy tanglin' with that bunch."

Nellie's mighty fearful about him doin' that, but he's all roused up now an' won't listen to her. He pulls the picket pin on his hoss an' loads her an' some blankets on it. In a gunny sack he puts enough grub to last her a day or so. "Here's my knife," he says, feelin' for her hand in the darkness. "You'll need it to cut the bread an'—" He stops as he hears a pebble roll behind him. A hand is laid on his shoulder, a man's hand, then somethin' cracks him a swat on the head an' he sees more stars than he ever saw before in his life.

When Hugh opened his eyes again it was daylight. He's layin' bound hand an' foot on the floor of the shack. Nellie is sittin' in a chair lookin' down on him with eyes that's red from cryin'. Seated at the table in the next room is two men an' Hawk-nose; they're eatin' breakfast an' chattin' right proud-like. Hugh groans—what a fool he was not to be more careful.

"Fooled you that time—fooled you," bawls the parrot from its cage in the corner.

Hugh shifts his eyes from the bird back to the table. The bunch that's settin' there is the hardest lookin' hombres he's ever seen, bar none. One fella is small, ratty, an' ornery lookin'. The other is bigger, with a scar clear across his face, an' he's meaner lookin' than the other, if such a thing could be possible.

"Huh," snorts the big fella, "our bad cowman is awake."

They all stands up for a minute to take a look at Hugh. The little hombre shovels a whole egg into his mug an' mutters somethin'.

"You leave that to me," says the other. "I know a way to finish guys like him.

Nobody'll ever know what became of him."

"You're a liar," yowls the parrot.

"Why'n hell did you bring that darn bird along, Kate?" growls the egg eater.

"He lends the home-like atmosphere, Spider," answers Eagle-beak. "You got to make this aunt business look real, you know. I hate the old buzzard as much as the rest of you."

"Grawk!" says the parrot, shiftin' on its perch an' peerin' through the bars.

"I'll grawk you, one of these days," snaps the female bandit.

Hugh rolls over on his side an' tries to figure on the situation. From their talk it sounded to him like the big fella was aimin' to do for him right pronto. After seein' his face, our cowboy takes the threat right serious. This gang wasn't no wise Western whatever. They'd slit a throat quicker'n anythin'. Hugh realizes that he ain't stackin' up against a gun-totin' rustler this time. He looks up at the girl an' tries to smile encouragin', but Nellie is scared to death; her hands is twistin' in her lap an' her big eyes keep a-wanderin' from the table in the other room back to Hugh.

The gang is about done with breakfast by this time. Hugh has tried the ropes around his wrists an' found 'em plenty tight; he could wiggle his fingers an' that was all. Whilst he was cussin' himself for bein' so careless up on the hill, there comes a soft thud an' somethin' hits the back of his hands. Feelin' aroun' with his fingers, he finds his own knife. Nellie has been watchin' her chance an' has dropped it down with the blade open when the gang wasn't lookin'.

Well, it's mighty hard finger work, but Hugh manages to saw the rope in two. Bracin' himself, he sits up quick an' makes a slash at the rope at his feet. It parts just as the two bad guys leap from the table. They land on him before he can stand up, an' less'n a second there's a sweet battle started. The hawk-nosed woman rushes in to lend a hand an' the packer's daughter dives for her. The girl is just a slip of a thing though, an' she ends up in a heap the other side of the room.

By this time Hugh has struggled to his feet an' is fightin' like a wildcat. He manages to get an arm aroun' the neck of each of the other two an' he's shuttin' down with all the strength he's got. I reckon it looked kinda funny to see three men with their backs all one way, squirmin' an' twistin', tryin' to reach guns an' knives, or anythin' that would give a break. The woman is hoverin' aroun' with a stove poker in her hand, waitin' a chance to deal Hugh a cold deck. But there's so many flyin' heels she can't get near enough.

At one time Hugh lifts the smaller fella off his feet an' twirls him around. The hombre's feet knocks over the parrot cage an' cracks old aunty's shins at the same time. Of the two, I reckon the woman made the most noise. She's madder'n ever now an' prances nearer with her poker lifted to crack Hugh's bobbin' head. But right then was when this here element of surprise shows up again.

When the cage was tipped over, the catch on the wire door was sprung. Mr. Polly was right quick to see this an' in no time he hooks his beak under the door an' hoists it up. "Grawk!" he cackles, an' joins the fray. I reckon the woman thought a flock of bees had lit on her face, 'cause the parrot began beatin' with its wings, clawin' with its feet an' hackin' away with its sharp beak. The female kidnapper is too busy gettin' a ruined face to do anything from that time on but call for help.

Now, Hugh Paxton was a Westerner, born an' raised in the open, you might say. He was hard as steel, an', what's more, mad. Them two bad eggs from the slums began to weaken after a few minutes of the neck twistin', so Hugh finally swings 'em out an' brings their heads together with a crack that oughta been heard 'round the world. They slumps to the floor side by side, an' in no time each has a head on him big enough to eat hay with.

The first thing Hugh does is tie 'em up, of course, then he goes over to Nellie an' lifts her up. The girl had been knocked out by Hawk-nose, but she opens her eyes pronto when she feels a set of arms around her. When she savvys it's Hugh, she

throws her arms aroun' his neck an' kisses him, same bein' plenty of reward in that cowpuncher's estimation. Hugh sets her down in a chair an' rubs her hands, which is plenty white an' cold. "You're a brave little girl," he says. "Dropping me that knife took courage."

"It was nothing to what you have done," she whispers.

"Me, I enjoyed it," says Hugh. "An'—" He stops as he hears someone sobbin' in the next room. Leavin' the girl, he walks to the door. Kidnappin' aunty has got her face buried in her arms on the table. Settin' on her shoulder an' kind of baffled by havin' his target hid, is the parrot. He's stretchin' his neck an' takin' a peck at the back of her neck once in awhile just to exercise his beak.

"Come in, come in, you bum," he chortles as Hugh steps through the door. "Fooled you that time, fooled you. Hah! Hell of a time, hell of a time!"

"All right, old timer," says Hugh. "You can shove off now; I'll take care of her."

"You're a liar," snaps the bird.

"Not this time. You get back to your cage an' let me tie this female gangster up." An' dogged if that parrot didn't fly back to the cage an' crawl in.

Well, altogether it took three days to get that gang to town an' locked up in the county calaboose. By that time Nellie's rich pa has arrived in his private car. It seems that after payin' the first ransom money an' not gettin' his daughter back, he sets a bunch of detectives to work an' follows 'em along as they trace the kidnappers.

Of course there's a happy reunion from which Hugh tries to efface himself plenty, but has no success whatever. Mr. J. Ogden Parker wants to reward him for his services, insistin' that in spite of the fun Hugh says he has had, he did run a big risk. It ends up with Hugh becomin' manager of the Flat Z, which same ranch is one of many that the packin' concern owns. In less than three months he owns it complete himself, same bein' a weddin' present from his pa-in-law. Oh yes, Nellie marries him—another element in the surprise? Naw, sir; what could two young folks with equal big eyes do but get married?

An' if you're ever up Catmints way an' drop in at the Flat Z, like enough you'll hear somebody say: "Well, come in, you bum—no foolin' either." All in all, Polly made a right handy cupid, 'cause things could of turned out a heap different, y'know.

LAST SURVIVOR OF THE MOHAWKS

PRINCESS KEN-TRO-KWI-OSTA, or White Deer, as she is known, is engaged in writing a history of the famous Mohawk tribe of Indians of which her father, Chief Running Deer, was the last hereditary chief. In her extensive research she is receiving the aid of the Indian Bureau of the Department of the Interior.

White Deer, who has toured the country in vaudeville, was induced to take on the task because she insists there is not, at the present time, a really authoritative work dealing with the history of her tribe, one of the most famous of the groups of native Americans.

She is a celebrated figure among the few survivors of the Six Nations, the great war tribes of New York State, and is a society favorite in New York. She has toured Europe and danced the Indian dances before the crowned heads of several monarchies in the old world.

Chief Running Deer, her father, died some years ago at the St. Regis Reservation. From him she obtained much material pertaining to the historic League of the Iroquois, who, from their strongholds in central New York, sent war parties to Florida on the South, Canada on the North and Dakota on the West. The Iroquois waged war with the French and English by turns, and on occasion fought with them as allies. For two hundred years they were a native power to be reckoned with.

White Deer's grandfather was Chief Jim Deer, who enlisted as a scout in the British army and was with Wolseley on the first expedition to relieve Khartoum. Years later he marched with Kitchener and saw the defeat of the Mahdi.

The Mohawks were great dancers, and although White Deer is an accomplished danseuse in all branches of the art terpsichorean, she has always specialized in the dances of her tribe, of which she is now the sole survivor. Royalty abroad liked the idea of having a real Indian princess dance for them, and showered White Deer with gifts. White Deer chatted with King George at a command performance in Buckingham Palace, and naively informed His Majesty that her ancestors struck the first blow for freedom on the American continent.

Princess White Deer is strikingly good looking, lithe, slim and graceful. She has a clear bronze complexion and typical Indian features.

Extry's Ranger

By
Paul Everman

Those Tyler girls are good sports. Yessir, every one of 'em—including Little Extry, who, having a ranger sweetheart, can pack whatever trials and tribulations fall to the rangers—and pack 'em with a smile.

FOLKS, I wouldn't advise any girl to fall in love with a forest ranger unless she's a girl that's got heaps of patience and frontier spunk, and can throw a gun, 'stead of a fainting fit, when the occasion demands. 'Cause there's lots of time when a ranger's sweetheart—

But, before I go any farther, maybe I'd better stand up straight so's you all can see me, and introduce myself. I'm Dot Tyler, and my dad, Star-K Tyler, a rip-snorter of an old cowman, nicknamed me "little Extry" when I was born, 'cause I was the seventh daughter in the Tyler family and made just one extry over a half a dozen. My dad says I'm no bigger than a good-sized mountain-trout. But I've been just as successful living on a grazing homestead as any of the other Tyler girls, you bet—even if I am called "the baby" of the family.

Honest, folks, I've found that homesteading in a lonely country is a reg'lar picnic compared to being a ranger's sweetheart. Please to goodness, though, don't think I regretted the fact that I'd got engaged to Jack Blaine, the ranger at the Turkey Canyon station.

This is what I mean: When you get engaged to a nice young fellow like Jack Blaine, you sorta take his troubles on your own shoulders. Being a ranger, Jack's life was no bed of violets and sweet-peas. He was about the busiest, hustlingest fellow you ever saw. His job was to build roads, and put up signs, and fix telephone lines, and do surveying, and keep his eye on careless campers that forgot to put out their fires, and watch to see that folks didn't kill deer and turkey out of season, and sock the penalty of the law on jaspers like old Carlos Armijo, who kept trying to run stock on the Forest Reserve without a permit.

Yes, sir, a ranger is just a kinda soldier for Uncle Sam. Only, if some jasper like Carlos Armijo shoots him dead, that ranger isn't furnished with a military funeral by Uncle Sam.

A ranger never knows what sort o' monkey-shining is going on behind his back. Like that day I discovered the stranger at the Turkey Canyon station.

I'd ridden from my homestead with a basket of fresh-baked bread. I knew the bread would appeal to Jack, being's the weather had got too warm for him to have any fresh meat hanging up and he'd been living on canned goods mostly.

The ranger cabin was a three-room log house with a sheet-iron roof. I dismounted at the red picket-fence. Just as I was passing the flag-pole in the yard, I noticed a strange horse back in the stable. He was a flea-bitten old gray crowbait, and the way he devoured a bale of Jack's alfalfa was sure a crime.

I was on the porch before I discovered the stranger. I spied him through the open door of the north room. He was a-sitting flat on the floor, kinda sideways to me.

He was about seven feet tall by six inches thick. His hair was the color of a sheep that's just staggered away from a dipping-vat. He wasn't what you'd call a shaving man, either, and the stubble on his face matched that dipped-sheep hair. He was ragged, and his shoes were run-over, and his eyes were so crossed that when they tried to look at the ceiling they wandered clear out in the yard and then ran into each other coming in the door again.

But happy! That specimen had a can of tomatoes tilted into his face, and between gurgles he was a-chanting something that went kinda like this: "'Mater, 'mater, how I love you little 'maters."

I noticed that he had about half a dozen cans of Jack's grub surrounding him, and half of 'em were empty.

"A crowbait in the stable, and a thief in the kitchen!" I thought, setting down my basket of bread on the porch and riding away in a hurry to find Jack Blaine.

It happened I knew where to find Jack. He told me just yesterday about planning a day's work fixing a telephone line down by the Turkeytrack schoolhouse. So I tickled Old Rock's ribs (he's my little bay cowpony) in the direction of the school.

Up the canyon I went, till the red roof of the schoolhouse peeked through the pines at me. And then I quit Old Rock all a-sudden, and caught my breath just before it left me complete, and went a-slipping from tree to tree towards Jack.

There he was, treed on a telephone pole. Jack, he's a kinda lengthy young man with curly brown hair. He's got a deep cleft in his chin, and right now he was so mad that the cleft was white as a scar.

He was clear at the top of that pole. A pair of pliers was gripped in his right hand. He was glaring down at old Carlos Armijo, a Mexican sheepman.

Old Carlos was mad, too. He was a big, fat, black-looking Mexican who always wore a wide leather belt cinched up tight about his middle. He had his hand clost to his gun, and was searching the Spanish language so's to find all the cuss-words.

Well, sir, that's just a sample of a ranger's life. Here poor Jack had been working his head off to get that telephone line fixed up, like the government expected him to do. And while old Carlos had him treed this-a-way, a doggone crowbait and a ragged stranger were eating him out of canned-goods and alfalfa.

"I got eet the drop, *gringo!*" old Carlos was bellowing. "I feex you. I show you how to make the monkey with me—no?"

"No you won't, you doggone lousy brown coyote!" I said, coming up behind him and jabbing the butt end of my quirt in his back. "You make a move, and I'll sure fix *you!* I'll show you what a Colt's forty-five can do, if you make a move, doggone you!" I said.

Old Carlos yelped, and flapped his fat hands in surrender. Jack pulled his gun, like he hadn't had a chance to do before, and came spurring down that pole.

"I'm packin' a gun 'special for you, these days, Armijo," he says, grim, throwing his six-shooter in the old sheepman's face. "Shore; I've heard about the threats you been makin' 'gainst me. And, after this play o' yores, I want to give you some plain advice. Next time I find you or yore sheep in the Reserve, you'd better go for yore gun *pronto*—'cause I'll have mine out, an' it'll be a-smokin' yore way. Savvy? You're not dealin' with Milburn now."

Just about then, old Carlos discovered that my "gun" was nothing but a quirt. He looked as foolish as one of his sheep, account of a girl bluffing him this-a-way. Jack ordered him to crawl on his horse and make distance. He did it, too.

Jack put his arm around me and whispered that I was a brave kid, even if I wasn't any bigger'n a pound of soap. I asked him about the trouble between him and old Carlos.

"I've had him arrested three times for runnin' sheep on the Reserve without a permit," Jack told me. "He hates to give up his old tricks. He's been grazin' off the government for five-six years. Milburn, who was ranger here before me, tried to stop him. But he pulled a gun on Milburn and bluffed him out. I reckon Milburn oughtn't be blamed so much for backin' down, being's he's a married man with a coupla kids, an' swappin' lead with an ol' cuss like Carlos Armijo is kinda risky business. But I didn't take any o' Carlos' bluff. I've heard he's out to *get* me. And when he caught me here on this pole, minute ago, I didn't even have a chance to draw my gun," he added, squeezing my hand kinda by way of praising me for helping him like I had.

"Jack, a ranger's life is sure a hard one," I sighed. "I bet you don't know there's a tramp at the station right now, eating up all your grub and—"

I didn't have a chance to finish. Jack beat me to the station by a hundred yards. But I was right at his heels when he went rushing inside.

That lengthy, cross-eyed stranger scrambled up, all smeared and dripping at the jaws. I jumped at him and grabbed two mutilated loaves of bread out o' his hands.

"Doggone you!" I cried, furious. "I'll show you how to steal my bread! Jack, he's plumb ruined the bread I brought for you."

Jack snagged the fellow by the neck.

"*Hombre,*" he grated, 'cause Jack sure was fond of my bread, "if you've got any prayers to say, say 'em now!"

"I bet yuh're Jack Blaine," says the stranger, soon as he could speak.

"You're doggone right I am!" Jack roared.

"Well, well," the stranger says. "How air yuh, Jack? Bet yuh don't know me, boy! I been a-layin' up fer long time to come a-visitin' yuh. Didn't find yuh home when I drifted in this afternoon. So I jest put my hoss in yore stable, an' made myself to home. My boy Clem allowed yuh'd be plumb tickled to see me."

"Yore boy Clem?" Jack gasped.

"Shore," the stranger answered, sticking out his hand. "How air yuh, Jack? I'm yore Uncle Rufus."

Jack just blinked at him. All at once, the cross-eyed old specimen began to sag and stagger. He folded up on the floor, pressing his hand to his left side and groaning about his heart being bad. Said he guessed he ought to have stayed at the ranch with Clem 'stead o' trying to come a-visiting in a high altitude like this.

"Heart trouble, shucks!" I thought, looking at the empty cans and remains of my loaves. "It's a plain case o' indigestion."

It kinda touched my heart, though, the gentle way that Jack picked the ragged old fellow up and laid him on his cot.

"I bet Clem's worried about his dad," Jack says to me when I went out to my horse, ready to start home, a few minutes later. "I'll have to write him and let him know the old gentleman got here all right. A seven-thousand-foot elevation like this *is* kinda hard on old people like Uncle Rufus."

"He seemes pretty chipper again now," I observed.

"Well, I ought to kinda relieve Clem's mind about him," Jack said. "Clem Harden's my cousin, you know. We punched cows together down Alma way before I took to rangin'. Uncle Rufus was my mother's brother. The Hardens was Montana folks, and Clem was the only one I knew. He wrote me 'bout a month ago, sayin' he'd got Uncle Rufus to come down from Montana, and that they'd bought out a little cow-outfit over in the Bobcat Range country, coupla hundred miles west o' here. But you heard Uncle Rufus tell all about that, just now," he said.

"Yes," I answered. "I guess there's no doubt he's your uncle, all right."

"'Course, he's kinda peculiar," Jack sorta apologized. "I recollect Clem tellin'

me once that his dad was a reg'lar ol'-timer, and not much for fixin' up and the like. But shucks! I don't begrudge my own uncle anything that's in my house. Maybe it ain't exactly accordin' to ranger rules for me to take a star border at the station this-a-way. But I won't turn down an uncle o' mine. No, sir!" he says.

"I should say not, Jack!" I told him. "He's your uncle, even if there's not much family resemblance. I hope he liked my bread. And I want you to bring him over to my house for supper to-morrow evening."

"Well, it sure is good of you to ask us, honey," Jack said.

The fact was that I wasn't greatly stuck on this cross-eyed old specimen's looks. But Jack was my fellow, and it wouldn't be treating him right if I'd snub his uncle, even if that old jasper did look like he'd just come out of a sheep-dip.

Anyhow, my own folks had done Jack a hard turn once, accusing him of being a married man and treating him plumb shameful. Jack had been a good sport about it, too, and even after the charges were proved false, he hadn't held any grudge against my folks. So, on Jack's account, I was determined to treat this here Uncle Rufus just as royal as I could, even if he did look like a scarecrow and ate like a wolf.

"I wisht yuh'd call me 'Uncle Rufus,' child," he kinda smirked at me when him and Jack came over for supper next evening.

But I just couldn't bring myself to call him "Uncle Rufus." To his face I called him "Mr. Harden." And to myself I called him "Uncle Appetite," 'cause that name sure fit him plenty and proper.

Jack had improved him some with a clean flannel shirt and a pair of high-topped shoes. After supper got under way, I said I wasn't hungry, and didn't eat scarcely a bite. I was afraid there wouldn't be enough to go 'round.

But "Uncle Appetite"—maybe he didn't stow the grub! He at three loaves of bread, a jar of marmalade, half a dish of tomatoes, three and a half wedges of devil's-food cake, six helpings of beans and fourteen strips of bacon, yes, sir!

Jack watched him anxious-like, but I just smiled like a good sport. And then "Uncle Appetite" keeled over in his chair, groaning something about his heart, his heart. Jack had to pour cold water on him to bring him around.

Well, Jack and I left him on my cot to recuperate, and took a little stroll outside. I asked Jack if old Carlos Armijo had given him any more trouble.

"Now don't you get all upset about me and that old root-eater, Dot," he kinda poo-hooed. "I figure I've called his bluff a-plenty, and he'll subside without any more trouble. Don't you worry about me and old Carlos none a-tall!" he laughed, but I suspicioned he was just putting on this-a-way to keep me from worrying.

We went back in the house. "Uncle Appetite" had made a plumb marvelous recovery. He was back at the table. He had a spoon in his hand. There was a pound of butter that hadn't been scarcely touched during the supper-meal. And the way he was going after it was sure a crime. He was taking it "straight."

"Why—Mister Harden!" I gasped. "That's—that's butter!"

"Yeah," he says, smacking his lips and helping himself to another spoonful. "Purty good!"

"See here, Uncle Rufus!" Jack exploded, getting mad. "You leave that butter alone and come with me. We're goin' back to the station—right now!"

Jack was sure mortified, but I took the whole business like a good sport, and called after them to come again.

But I sure felt sorry for Jack. He came over the next day, looking awful glum.

"Dot," he groaned, "I don't know what in sam-hill to do with that uncle o' mine. The reckless old gander went down to Jaramillo last night, and got to drinkin' and gamblin' with some Mexicans there. I'd loaned him five dollars to buy a new hat with. But he lost it all, gamblin', and then he put up his ol' gray horse and lost it too! Come staggerin' up to the station, hilarious drunk, about three o'clock this mornin'. I'm afraid he'll get on another

spree, and maybe that bad heart o' his'll play out on him."

"Don't you give him any more money," I advised.

"He struck me for another loan this mornin', but I turned him down," Jack says. "Dad-gum it, he's my uncle, and I reckon Clem is sorta dependin' on me to look out after the old codger and keep him straight. Clem ain't like his dad a-tall," he added.

It was that same afternoon that I missed Old Rock, my little bay pony, from the horse-pasture down by the seep on my lower forty. My saddle had disappeared too. I suspicioned right off that some Mexican had been responsible. So I strapped on my gun, ran over to my sister Becky's, borrowed her saddler, and took up Old Rock's trail.

I started to cut for sign at the wire-gate that opened into the horse-pasture. I wasn't long finding fresh tracks. I knew they were Old Rock's, too, for he was pigeon-toed in the left front-foot, and I could have read his tracks anywhere.

I kept trailing. The farther I went, the madder I got. I was all prepared to shoot the heels off a Mexican horse-thief and make him dance proper and plenty.

The tracks followed the Jaramillo road a ways, and then cut to the west, kinda circling the mountains. I passed a herd of sheep grazing on the mesa just outside the Forest Reserve. Old Rock's tracks led me on through some scrub *piñons* and junipers.

All a-sudden, just after I'd turned into a *cañada* and gone up the mountain-slope a ways, I pulled up.

Just ahead of me was an old prospect-hole among the rocks. Clost by, two men sat on their horses, talking. One of 'em was that fat old Mexican sheepman, Carlos Armijo. He sat on a red roan horse. The second horse was my Old Rock cayuse.

And the rider that straddled Old Rock —it was that cross-eyed, lengthy specimen that I called "Uncle Appetite"!

Him and old Carlos seemed to be having a might intimate palaver. I pulled Becky's horse back to cover and waited there till old Carlos rode away. Then I sailed up to "Uncle Appetite" and lit into him like a cyclone.

"I hate to think that Jack Blaine's uncle is a horse-thief!" I said to him. "But the facts are plain. That's my horse and saddle. You took 'em."

"Jest borried 'em," he says, grinning weak-like. "Yessir, Miss Extry Dot Tyler, I needed a hoss. Mine died, pore ol' feller—"

"I sure hate to think that Jack's uncle is a liar," I let him know, prompt, "but I happen to know about you losing that old gray crowbait in a card-game. If you needed a horse, why didn't you ride one of Jack's, or else come to me like a gentleman and ask to borrow Old Rock?"

"Well," he says glib-like, "Jack's got two hosses, but they're both buckin' brutes that it ain't safe to ride, 'specially when I got this bad heart trouble. I knocked at your door six times this afternoon, but couldn't raise nobody. So I jest saddled up yore hoss. Knowed yuh was Jack's sweetheart and wouldn't begrudge his pore ol' Uncle Rufus the loan of a hoss," he kinda smirked.

"Either your knocks or my ears were awful weak," I told him. "But how come you to be talkin' to old Carlos Armijo so doggone friendly and confidential?"

"That's it!" he whispered, awful secret-like. "That's why I needed a hoss to-day. Jack's been a-tellin' me 'bout this ol' greaser sheepman layin' up to kill him. I'm tryin' to help Jack. Yessir, I wanted a hoss to ride so's I could do some detective work. An' I done it!"

"What'd you do?" I asked him.

"Why," he whispered, "I found this ol' greaser cuss an' pumped him about proper. Pertended I had a grudge ag'in' Jack, an' offered to throw in with ol' Armijo. He got real confidential. He's planning to put some o' his sheep on the Reserve to-morrer. Tee-hee," he tittered. "The ol' gazabo didn't savvy I'm Jack's uncle. When he tries to put them sheep on the Reserve, Jack an' me'll be layin' fer him. Don't yuh see?"

"Well, it's about time you were doing something to repay Jack," I told him,

plain. "You've been loafing around and eating his grub and gambling away his money. You've just been imposing on Jack's good-nature and relationship," I said. "And another thing: the next time you take my horse without asking, I'll sure knock some of the dust out of your coat-tails with a six-shooter."

He began to sniffle and wipe his eyes, like I'd hurt his feelings something fierce. I felt kinda sorry for him, and didn't rawhide him any more. But when we got back to the Jaramillo road, I made him get off Old Rock and walk the rest of the way to the ranger station, while I rode on home with the two horses.

I lay awake most of the night, wondering if old Carlos Armijo would try to put his sheep on the Reserve like "Uncle Appetite" said, and if the affair would end up in a bad shooting-scrape when Jack tried to stop old Carlos. Being a ranger's sweetheart is sure a worrisome proposition, let me tell you!

About ten o'clock next morning, a broad-shouldered, square-jawed man with bushy gray hair—a typical old-time cowman if there ever was one—rode up to my cabin.

"I've been over to the Turkey Canyon ranger station a-lookin' for Jack Blaine," he says, bowing polite. "He wasn't there, and one o' his neighbors thought mebby I might find him here."

"Why, no, I haven't seen Jack all morning," I answered.

"This is Miss Dot Tyler, ain't it?" he asked. "Well, my name's Harden. I'm Jack's Uncle Rufus."

"Migosh!" I gasped. "Are there two Uncle Rufuses?"

"No, by gravy, there ain't!" he roared. "And as soon's I get my paws on the polecat that claims he's Rufus Harden, I'll shore rip his hide off an' hang it on a convenient fence."

"You're Jack's uncle, all right," I nodded, a-sudden, observing the deep cleft in his square chin. "You look like him."

"An' do yuh know this polecat that's been packin' my name?" he asked. "Is he a cross-eyed, lop-eared—"

"That's him!" I broke in.

"Heart trouble—" he began.

"And a gosh-awful appetite!" I added, quick.

"Grub-Line Beeson, jest like I figgered!" he shouted. "Soon's my boy Clem got Jack's letter, I jumped on a railroad train. Hired this livery hoss at Kelso, an' come a-lookin' for Jack an' that hydrophoby polecat. Yessir, Jack wrote Clem that *I* had arrived safe and sound, an' that he was enjoyin' a splendid visit from *me*, but that *my* heart was causin' me some trouble. I says to Clem, 'Goodbye, Clem. I'm goin' to visit Nephew Jack. If a gent named Grub-Line Beeson is masqueradin' under my name, he may die quick an' sudden—an' it won't be heart trouble that kills him, neither,' I says."

"But who is this Grub-Line Beeson, anyway?" I asked him.

"He's jest a low-down range-tramp that rides the chuck-line continual an' imposes on range hospitality," Uncle Rufus says. "He drifted in to our ranch coupla weeks ago. We grubbed him till we ketched him cheatin' at cards. Then we kicked him out. But he'd heerd me an' Clem talkin' 'bout my nephew, Jack Blaine, who was a forest ranger down here by Kelso. I'd been tellin' Clem that I figgered on makin' a visit on Jack, who I've never met. No doubt Grub-line Beeson figgered it'd be plumb easy to pa'm hisself off as me, an' impose on Jack's hospitality."

I began to get scared, all at once, remembering the private palaver this Grub-Line Beeson had had with old Carlos Armijo the day before. When I told Uncle Rufus about it, he looked powerful grim.

"I don't like the looks o' things," he says. "Beeson claimed he was stringin' that sheepman along, an' that he was goin' to help Jack stop him from puttin' sheep on the Reserve, did he? No tellin' what that low-down skunk's plannin' to do. I got to find Jack an' put him wise."

He rode away to the ranger station, and you bet I wasn't far behind. But we didn't find any sign of Jack. Uncle Rufus tramped up to the door. All a-sudden he

whipped out his gun, and threw down on a lengthy shape that came dodging out the door.

"I got yuh, Beeson!" he thundered.

It was "Uncle Appetite," sure enough. We'd got here just in time to stop a raid on the ranger cabin. He'd sure cleaned that cabin out complete. His pockets were stuffed with knives and socks and grub and odds-and-ends. And he carried a bundle of Jack's clothes in his hand.

Yes, sir, "Uncle Appetite" was just ready to make a getaway. When he saw the *real* Uncle Rufus, his face fell flat with dismay, and his cross eyes began to race around all over his head.

"Where's Jack Blaine?" demanded Uncle Rufus. When the scared *hombre* kinda hesitated to answer, he yanked him inside the cabin.

Five minutes later, when "Uncle Appetite" came staggering outdoors, he looked like he'd been dragged at the end of a rope over fifty sections of broken lava country. He'd sure got treated to one tremendous licking.

"Miss Dot," Uncle Rufus says to me, husky-like, "I made him tell! I'd 'a' killed him if he hadn't told the truth. The double-dealin' polecat—he throwed in with the sheepman yuh told about. That sheepman hired him to put Jack out o' the way!"

He forced the sorry range-tramp to get up in the saddle in front of him.

"But—what's happened?" I gasped.

"This low-down varmint!" Uncle Rufus sputtered. "He pertended to be leadin' Jack to a herd o' sheep that this here Armijo Mexican was supposed to have put on the Reserve. He took Jack by su'prise an' pushed him in an ol' prospect-hole. There was water in the hole. Mebby the boy's drownded by now."

I was plumb killed for a minute.

My dad had always said about me: "Little Extry's got plenty spunk." Well, I sure needed that spunk now. After a girl had known the happiness that comes from being loved by a ranger like Jack Blaine, and then, at one blow, all that happiness seems smashed forever—Folks, a girl that's a ranger's sweetheart sure has her moments of dread and desperation.

It didn't seem hardly possible that a human being could be as mean and low-down as this Grub-Line Beeson. He'd lied to Jack and gambled away Jack's money and eaten his grub and worn his clothes. In return for all Jack had done for him, he'd bargained with old Carlos Armijo to take Jack's life.

When I finally got my wits working again, I saw Uncle Rufus pounding away down the road. He had this Beeson up in front of him.

"He's making Beeson show the way to that prospect-hole," I thought, and took after them.

We sure split the wind. Uncle Rufus turned south on the Jaramillo road. I wasn't far behind. Pretty soon, Uncle Rufus left the road, and cut to the west, circling the mountains. I spurred up and passed him and his captive like a whirlwind.

My wits were working better now. I remembered the place on the mountain-slope where I'd sighted Grub-Line Beeson and Carlos Armijo talking, the day before. I recalled an old prospect-hole there. It must be *the one,* I thought.

Old Rock was a speedy little pony, and bein's Uncle Rufus' mount was loaded double, I soon left him 'way behind. I cut through *piñons* and junipers, and headed up the *cañada* where Armijo and Beeson had met the day before.

There, right against the mountain-slope, was the old prospect-hole, a shaft that led down through solid rock. I jumped down and ran to the edge of the hole.

Dreading to look, I finally managed to call out: "Jack!"

"Dot? Is it you?" a voice answered, from 'way underground.

"Jack!" I shouted, plumb overjoyed. "Are you all right?"

"Kinda wet," he answered, cheerful. "If I hadn't managed to get a hand-hold on the side o' this shaft, I reckon I'd be saturated complete by now." And he added, grim: "I'm jest a-dyin' to have a medicine talk with that cross-eyed uncle

o' mine, and question the kind intentions that caused him to give me this bath."

I could see his head sticking up out of the water, about ten feet below.

"Everything's all right, Jack," I called, hasty. "I'll get you out."

I ran to Old Rock and led him clost to the shaft. One end of my cow-rope was tied to the saddle-horn. I began to play out the other end towards Jack.

"I'll have Old Rock pull you out, easy-like," I called.

Just then, I heard a horse come up behind me.

"Jack's all right, Uncle Rufus!" I cried, without looking around. "We'll get him out *pronto*."

Two hands grabbed my shoulders. They gave me a shove. Everything went dark, for I was shooting down into that shaft! I bumped against one side. And then I was under water that sure chilled me and took my breath away.

A minute—or an hour—later, I savvied that Jack was holding me up with one hand, while he hung on to the side of the rough, rocky shaft with the other.

Peering down at us from above was a black-looking face. This was the rider that had come up behind me. I had thought it was Jack's Uncle Rufus. But it wasn't. It was old Carlos Armijo.

He didn't say a word, but his eyes glared down at us. There was no mercy in 'em. Something gleaned darkly in his hand. It was a gun.

Old Carlos had come to finish his job. He had hired Grub-Line Beeson to push Jack in the hole. He had come now to see if Beeson had succeeded. He had wanted to see whether Jack was drowned.

Those glaring black eyes, full of revenge and hate, told that old Carlos meant to carry out his plan to the end. He meant to finish his job. The gun-muzzle angled down, pointing towards us.

"The low-down coyote!" Jack panted, and his face went white.

His left arm tightened about me and held me close. His eyes gleamed clost into mine. They were full of dread.

"Honey, this is what comes o' lovin' a ranger—and tryin' to help him," he said, husky.

I tried to smile at him. I knew what he meant. He was afraid old Carlos would shoot me too—that maybe this old shaft would be a grave that would hide forever a secret of Carlos Armijo's revenge.

I shut my eyes. Jack's arm was around me. That helped some—it helped a heap.

A shot rolled and echoed.

Honest to goodness, folks, I didn't faint. But for five minutes I was so doggone befuddled that I didn't savvy exactly what was going on.

Not till a rope had hauled me and Jack out of the shaft, and I saw old Carlos Armijo groaning on the rocks, and Jack's Uncle Rufus standing up there with a gun in his hand—not till then did I begin to understand things.

"I rode up an' plugged the varmint jest as he was ready to shoot," says Uncle Rufus. "Grub-Line Beeson got away durin' the fracas. I'm yore Uncle Rufus, boy," he added, and explained the how-come of it all to Jack.

"You're doggone right you're my Uncle Rufus!" Jack shouted, wringing the old gentleman's hand. "One look tells me that, 'cause you're Clem Harden all over again—Clem, with twenty-five years added to him, and a mite o' gray in his hair."

"Well, one look at this young lady here tells *me* that you're a mighty lucky man," Uncle Rufus observed.

Jack's arm was around me, and we were sure happy even if we were soaked and dripping.

"Yessir, Uncle Rufus," he says, earnest. "I'm luckier'n I deserve, I reckon. For a girl like Dot deserves something better than to be engaged to a forest ranger that's always getting mixed up in bad grazing-feuds and the like."

"It all depends on who that ranger is!" I answered with a smile.

The Flaming Trail

A WESTERN SERIAL ROMANCE

By Frank C. Robertson

PART FIVE

READ WHAT HAS GONE BEFORE AND GO ON WITH THE STORY

ALBERT MULLINS, a wealthy Chicago livestock man, who hogs the range and runs sheep on it, disinherits his son, GEORGIE, as a ne'er-do-well. That night Georgie is reported killed by gangsters. His father believes the report, but actually Georgie, saved from the gangsters by BILL HANFORD, a cattleman who hates Al Mullins, and LAURA GRANT, secretary to the sheep baron, goes West with Hanford and joins the cattlemen in the war against his father. On the range he is known as Pug Lyons, a prizefighter, and, contrary to Hanford's expectations, becomes an excellent rangeman.

The cattlemen, much as they hate Al Mullins, quarrel and are disunited in their fight. Bill Hanford, marketing cattle through Mullins in Chicago, and in love with Mullins' secretary, is afraid openly to antagonize the sheep baron.

When he learns that Mullins and Laura have come West, he at once goes to see Laura.

Furious because of her coolness to him, he returns to camp and tells Georgie he believes him to be a spy for his father.

Georgie is astounded, but, broke and free again, he sets out with ADAM SHEETS, a friend, for JACOB KENT'S ranch. Kent, an Englishman, somewhat disliked and distrusted by the discouraged cattlemen, hires him. Georgie does not know that Kent recognizes him as Mullins' son and considers him a spy for Mullins, nor does he know that CATHERINE BEDFORD, Kent's daughter, who is a young widow, knows who he is and is determined to use her wits against him if he IS a spy.

Catherine weaves a wily spell about Georgie and even lends him the money to take an option on the Smith Ranch which adjoins her father's place.

While lunching in town with Smith and the widow, George meets Laura. He realizes that Hanford has deliberately kept her presence from him, and Laura realizes that Georgie is no longer the ne'er-do-well known to the Chicago night clubs—but a real man.

Mullins meets Kent face to face and, surrounded by a sea of sheep, they come to an open break. The sheriff, working for Mullins, arrests Kent and Adam Sheets and takes them to jail. When Catherine and Georgie return, Al Millins is in command of the situation and the sheep are crossing the Kent Ranch.

Under cover of darkness, Georgie kidnaps his father and forces him to rescind his orders. When Kent returns to his ranch, he holds the sheep for damages. Mullins pays the damages and decides to withdraw his sheep, but the defeat strikes at his very soul. He declares he will break Kent it it takes every dollar he possesses.

After accepting the option money from Catherine, Georgie is forced to reveal his identity to Jacob Kent, but is surprised to find that Kent is well aware of the fact.

In desperation, Georgie quits the Kent Ranch and leaves town to interview his uncle, Henry Turnbow, from whom he borrows the money to buy the Smith Ranch.

When Georgie returns he is arrested. The plan is to keep him in jail until his option with Smith has expired. In desperation Georgie reveals his identity, but his father denies him. Laura comes to the rescue, raises bail, and he is released.

Bill Hanford, dominated by his disappointment over not winning Laura, double-crosses the cattlemen and joins the sheep camp. He tells Al Mullins the truth about Georgie's disappearance and Laura's hand in the conspiracy.

At a meeting of the cattlemen Hanford announces that Georgie is his father's

spy, thereby playing into the hands of Al Mullins and dealing a death blow to the cattle cause.

Even Catherine Bedford turns from the struggling boy.

George returns to town and finds that his father has discharged Laura and that she is working in a local shop. He closes his deal with Smith and becomes a bonafide ranch owner. The two gunmen that threatened his life in Chicago now arrive in town and in the employ of his father.

In a stormy meeting with his father, George finds that the sheep will again flood the cattle range, passing over a small bridge owned by the Perry brothers—nesters, who have joined Al Mullins' forces.

The last vestige of the worthless boy disappears in George, when he calmly plays a lone hand and blows up the bridge. But he is totally unprepared for the shot that follows the explosion which kills one of the Perry men. George realizes that he will be held responsible for that shot!

CHAPTER XXII

Dead Men in a Row

JUST before he rounded the corner of the cabin George heard voices. He flattened himself against the logs and listened.

"Don't strike another match, you fool. You'll be getting us all killed," he heard a man hiss.

"But Los is killed—I gotta look at him," another man said.

"Let him croak," said the other, unfeelingly. "Come on, Pinky. You go down the river and I'll go up. Then you light your lamp again, Perry, and if that bird shoots we'll get him."

So the two gunmen had been left to help guard the bridge, and doubtless if an open attack had been made they would have given a good account of themselves. George wished that he had not obeyed the kindly impulse. He had to get away from there immediately, but it was a matter requiring caution. If he made a run for the road, he would be in plain sight, and he knew that Muff Munsen would bring him down with his automatic before he could reach shelter. He thought of hugging against the back of the house until the two gunmen moved away, but there was danger that they would circle the house before leaving it. In that case he would surely be caught.

The other alternative was to beat a retreat to the cluster of stables that stood directly back of the house and against the bluff. There was a chance that he could hide there until he found an opportunity to escape. It looked like the best bet, and he legged it for the closest building.

He threw open the first door he came to and plunged in. A moment later he regretted it as a clamorous noise arose on every side. He had burst into a chicken coop, and the chickens, perhaps already aroused by the explosion, greeted his entrance with a cackling chorus of alarm. And not content to sit on the roost and cackle, they flew in every direction, shrieking at the top of their capacity, and brushing him with their wings.

As quickly as he could George opened the door and rushed out, but the harm had been done.

"He's in with the chickens," he heard Garfinkle call.

"There he goes," Muff Munsen answered, and the words were accompanied by a flash of flame. A bullet plunked into the log wall just behind George's back.

Seeing another door, George hurtled through it, and this time he was more lucky. It was a horse barn he had chosen, but he had no wish to linger longer than necessary. He saw an open hay window on the other side of the manger, and a moment later he stood outside in a stockyard.

It was now a question of hide, fight, or run. He perceived that the bluff behind the stables was too steep and abrupt to climb, and that made immediate flight rather out of the question. He resolved to hide if he could, and fight if necessary.

The gunmen were beating a rat-a-tat-tat against the stables with their automatics,

to the great danger of the animals inside, and Tub Perry had apparently joined them, for George could hear him begging the men to be careful.

A spasm of anger suddenly shot over George. These professional killers, men of the most degraded type, had been brought hundreds of miles to terrorize, and commit murder. They were trying to kill him! And with equal suddenness he lost his impulse to hide. Instead of that he meant to fight it out with the gunmen to a bitter finish.

The stables were low, log buildings, and the roofs were of dirt, and on top of that was a thickness of straw, or old, spoiled hay. Catching hold of the projecting end of a log, George drew himself up on the roof of the building he had just passed through, and crawled up to where he could see over.

"We got him trapped," he heard Tub Perry say. "He can't git over the bluff, an' if we watch each end o' the stable yard, he can't git out."

"All right. You watch the upper end, Pink the lower, and I'll talk to him," Muff answered. He raised his voice to a shout: "Come on out, gink—we gotcha dead to rights."

Munsen had been careful to get under cover himself before he delivered his ultimatum, but George took a shot in his direction.

Instantly two shots plunked into the dirt roof in reply, but George had leaped to the ground and was racing toward the end of the stables. He rounded the corner of a stable, dropped on his knee and fired at the place where Muff Munsen had recently been. Then he dropped flat and rolled back to safety. A moment later he heard the boom of a forty-five, but Tub Perry's bullet was too high and wide to do any damage.

As he got to his feet, a bullet zipped along horizontally with the stable, and on his side. He realized now that he would soon be completely flanked, and the back of the stables would be as unsafe as the front. Once more he crawled through the open hay window among the now snorting, yanking horses. A desperate plan to untie one of the horses, and try to make a break for freedom upon it occurred to him, but he gave it up. They would surely get him before he could get a horse out of the door and mount.

Then, as he moved along between two horses, he heard the door open. It closed again, softly; but he felt sure that Muff Munsen was now inside the stable with him. It was pitch dark, but the gangster's ears were acute, and at the first suspicious sound he would shoot.

For a painfully long time George stood immovable, then he thought he heard his man moving toward the manger on the other side of the horse on his right. Then, at the risk of getting himself kicked, George moved behind the horse. He had tried to move silently, but a gun roared and a stab of flame shot before his eyes. Munsen could not have been more than six feet away, and George leaped.

The automatic blazed again just as George collided with the gunman, and a horse gave a startled squeal of anguish. George found an arm and twisted it upward as Munsen continued to fire till the cartridge clip was empty. But before the last shot was fired a hard fist landed against George's jaw, and for a moment it was all he could do to stay up. He had forgotten that Muff Munsen had been a boxer. But in a moment he had shaken off the effects of the blow, and he forced the gangster's arm back and down. Munsen was still trying to swing on his jaw, while he yelled for help, but George was effectually blocking the blows with his other arm. Then suddenly getting a grip on the lighter man, George gave a tremendous heave which threw the gangster over his head, and the fellow struck the log wall with a thud. Munsen rolled back on the floor, and a horse lashed out with both heels. George heard the sickening sound of a skull being smashed, and then his attention was directed once more to the door.

He did not know what Pinky Garfinkle said, but he saw the glint of the gun in the gangster's hand, and realized that he must act promptly.

"Throw up your hands," he ordered.

His own gun was ready in his hand, and he sensed rather than saw Garfinkle raise his gun. The two shots came as one. A searing pain burned George's side, but Garfinkle fell across the door sill with a ghastly cough.

George leaped over the body in frantic haste to get into the cool, clean air that was not fetid with the smell of blood. He almost collided with Tub Perry.

"Up with your hands!" he jerked out viciously, jamming his gun into the ranchman's stomach, and the astounded fellow complied instantly. George reached out and took the gun from the man's hand, and tossed it away. He realized then that he was master of the situation, but he experienced no feeling of elation. Now that it was over he felt only repulsion toward the whole ghastly business.

"Get a lantern," he ordered Perry. "We've got to see how badly those men are hurt."

Perry, the bully, was completely cowed. He had little stomach for gun fighting, anyhow, and the moment he recognized the identity of his captor all the spirit went out of him. He had not forgotten the beating this supposed prizefighter had once given him, and now that this same man had defeated the two imported gunmen in a gun fight, he was too formidable for Tub to think of opposing him.

Perry led the way to the cabin. The missing bridge caused him to emit a groan. "That bridge cost us a thousand dollars' worth o' hard work," he mourned.

"It would have still been standing if you hadn't proved traitorous to your friends, and sold out to the sheepmen," George said sharply.

"We'd 'a' went broke like the other ranchers if we hadn't, an' it give us a chance tuh stay in business an' clean up a few hundred besides," the man whined.

"How much did Mullins pay you for your treachery?" George demanded.

"Aw, go tuh hell—"

They were now inside the cabin, and George saw the body of the other Perry upon the floor. The man was indubitably dead. "It might save trouble if I was to dispose of you, too," George murmured. "I could chuck you all in the river, and with the bridge having gone out, people would think—"

Tub Perry began to beg. "Don't kill me, mister," he pleaded. "I never fired a shot at yuh, honest tuh Gawd, I never. I'll tell yuh anything. Old Mullins gave us two thousand dollars for the use o' the bridge. An' he promised tuh pertect it for us. He brought these two gunmen here—it wasn't us."

"All right, I'll have some more to say to you pretty soon," George said. "Get that lantern."

They returned to the stables, but the two gunmen were past aid. Garfinkle had been shot through the heart, and Munsen's skull was crushed. They carried the two men back into the cabin, and laid them alongside Los Perry.

George was anxious to get away from the horrible sight, but there were still things he wanted to get out of Tub Perry.

"I want you to understand, first of all," he said, "that I didn't kill your brother."

The rancher showed his unbelief.

"Where was your brother standing when he was shot?" he asked.

"Right in the door—he'd just opened it."

"And he was shot in the chest—before he stepped outside," George pointed out. "Not only that, he was killed by a rifle bullet. I haven't a rifle, and none can be found on this side of the river except your own. In other words, somebody was lying in wait across the river to get you or your brother, and it happened to be him instead of you."

Perry's look of incredulity gave way to one of conviction—and relief that it was his brother instead of himself that had been killed.

"It was a pal of yours then—prob'ly Adam Sheets," he asserted.

"It was not Adam, and I had no pal. I can prove that I came here alone, so don't figure on that possibility any more," George said.

"What's the use o' the questions?" Perry demanded sullenly. "Yuh did kill these other fellers. You're the one tuh worry."

"Me?" George laughed grimly. "I killed these fellows in self-defense. They followed me from Chicago, and I can prove that they tried to kill me back there. I'll get a reward for disposing of them. Now what I want to know, and what I'm going to find out, unless the number of corpses around here increases suddenly, is who drove those sheep back across here?"

"I dunno," the man said dully, but George knew that he lied.

"You tell me the truth, or—" George's hand moved suggestively toward his hip. The man looked once at the row of corpses and began to talk.

"It was Adam Sheets an' a bunch o' them damn nesters from up yonder."

"How did they do it? Was there any fighting?"

"Not that I know of. They come down here, Sheets, old Alex McPhee, an' a couple more, an' called us out. They covered us with their guns an' told us not tuh try tuh keep the sheep from crossin'. That was before these other two fellers got here. Purty soon the sheep arrived. There was a couple of them damn nesters behind every herd, makin' the crew with the herd do the trailin'. They'd took the herders' guns away from 'em an' nobody was makin' any fuss," Perry explained.

George was not greatly surprised to learn that Adam had had a hand in the raid, nor to learn that it had been smoothly carried out. But other points were not so clear.

"How far the other side of the bridge did they drive 'em?" he asked, purposely withholding his main question.

"To the top o' the ridge was all."

"Why didn't the sheep come back?"

"It was all they could do tuh git 'em across once. They'd have balked if they'd tried tuh put 'em across again. An' they told us they'd make it hot for us if we let 'em come back," Perry said.

"There was a man killed—on which side of the river?" George shot out.

"Why—why—on the other side," Perry blurted. "I don't know," he suddenly collected himself. "I didn't see nobody killed."

"Don't lie, Perry," George warned. "You didn't see a man killed, but a dead man was brought down from the other side, after Sheets and his men had left, brought across the bridge here and turned over to the sheriff when he arrived. Isn't that right?"

He ground out his statements savagely, as though he knew absolutely that he was right, but inwardly he was anything but sure of his ground. But he was staking everything on the belief that Adam Sheets and his associates had not killed anybody. And if they had not then there was something decidedly spurious about the murder charge that had been laid against Homer Willis and the other ranchers. He believed that a man had been killed, and in his mind he had hazarded a long guess that he knew who was the killer.

"Well, yuh can't mix me up in it," Perry said sullenly.

"I'm not trying to," George said sincerely. "In fact, I don't believe you had any more to do with it than you say you had. Now tell me this: was Oscar Larsen with the sheep when they were driven across the bridge?"

"No. If he had been Sheets couldn't have got away with it. He'd crossed the bridge to look after the other sheep the day before."

"And it was him who brought the dead man back here, wasn't it?" George shot out forcefully, his eyes dominating the bully with a strength that was greater than physical pressure.

"It was," Perry admitted.

"Just one more question, and if you answer it correctly I'm through with you. Who was it told you to keep still about the body being brought back across the bridge, so the killing could be fastened upon innocent men?"

"It was old Al Mullins," Perry answered without hesitation.

CHAPTER XXIII

A Bit of Writing

THOUGH he had been leading up to the question that definitely incriminated his father, George had somehow hoped that the answer would be different.

For a long time he was silent, brooding over the fact that old Al had stooped to such a contemptible action in his effort to win.

One point that still bothered him was why they had accused Willis and his friends instead of the men who had actually raided the sheep, but gradually he saw the reason for that. Since somebody was to be framed, anyway, it was safer and easier to frame those who would be entirely unsuspecting. They would figure that Sheets and the nesters would be too frightened by the possibility of conviction for murder to step up and admit their part.

By arresting practically all the other cattlemen it would be difficult for them to prove alibis except by each other. Eventually the men would probably be acquitted, and that perhaps was what old Al really desired. But by the time they were out of jail, their range would be over-run with sheep. And again it was possible that Al Mullins was wary about trying to work any kind of frame-up on Jacob Kent. Finally, the ill-feeling between the cattlemen and the nesters would keep the one faction from going to the rescue of the other.

Though the night's work had been far more dramatic than he had intended it to be, George was grimly glad that it had turned out as it had. It would be some time at least before the Mullins outfit could get their sheep around in position to invade the range again—and then they would find a new owner of the Smith range to block their progress. Or would they? He owned the ranch right enough, with a moral right to the range adjoining; but that he would be in a position to fight back was doubtful.

He would now be accused of murder as well as dynamiting the bridge. He believed he could win acquittal on the murder charges if Perry stuck to his story, and he could square the bridge incident with some of Uncle Henry's cash. But Tub Perry would not stick to his story. At the first opportunity the man would swear that George had killed his brother as well as the other man, and as he would have to confess coming there for the purpose of blowing up the bridge, he could not very well plead self-defense.

He thought of taking the man along with him, but aside from a natural repugnance to leaving the dead men alone he began to realize that it would not help his case any to drag the reluctant Perry along with him.

He was determined that the range should be saved from sheep, and that his father should be made, for once in his life, to taste defeat. But he saw that to accomplish that he would have to destroy himself. The cattlemen, he saw clearly, were not strong enough of themselves to defeat the colossal power of the sheep baron. But there was one thing which even Al Mullins feared, and that thing George proposed to align against his parent.

The first smoke was just twisting above the roof at the J K Ranch when George rode up to the bunkhouse door and shouted for Adam. The old puncher came tumbling out breathlessly with one boot on and the other in his hand.

"Hell, Pug, where yuh been? What's up?" Adam demanded.

"Well, I've bought the Smith ranch, blowed up the Perry bridge, killed a couple of men, an' now I'm here," Georgie said with rather a pallid grin.

"An' you're the guy that was a tenderfoot a few weeks ago," Adam commented. "You're jokin' though?"

"Not a bit of it, Adam," George said seriously. "It all happened." And he proceeded to relate the events of the last twenty-four hours.

"Good Gawd, things are in a muss!" Adam said. "It looks like you an' me swings."

"Why you?" George demanded.

"Hell, yuh don't think I'd let Homer an' the others lay in jail on account o' what I done?"

"I don't, Adam, but I can't see what good yuh'd do. Will the other fellows that were with you own up to their parts?"

"Tub Perry can identify every one of 'em."

"But he won't," George declared.

"They will if Kent asks 'em. They're a tough breed up there, an' they don't like the cattlemen that have tried tuh run 'em out; but they'll go through hell for Kent—right to a man," Adam said confidently.

"I think maybe Kent ought to know about this," George suggested, and Adam hastened to bring the ranch owner.

Perhaps half an hour later Jacob Kent went back into the house, where his daughter, already dressed in a becoming outdoor outfit, was waiting fretfully for his return.

"What is it, Father? Why has George Mullins come here at this hour?" she demanded imperatively.

"We've misjudged that young man, Catherine," Kent said soberly. "He has really been fighting that father of his, and what I mean is he's been fighting hard."

"What has he done?" Catherine's inquiry came with a gasp.

"Something that will probably land him in the penitentiary for a good long term of years, if it doesn't hang him."

"Has he—has he killed somebody?"

"Two men—and he'll probably hang for the murder of a man he didn't kill."

"Father! Can't he be hidden? That Klepper man, you know—"

"Catherine! You don't mean to imply—it's rot of course—but the way you looked—"

"It isn't rot, Father," the pale-faced girl admitted. "I don't know why I did it, but I—I—did fall in love with him."

"My God!" Kent's tone expressed genuine agony. "He came here to borrow a car to get to Pebble quickly, where he is going to give himself up."

"But he mustn't," Catherine said shrilly. "They can't find Klepper, and we can keep them from finding him."

"He's not the kind to go underground. He wouldn't do it," Kent said gently.

"Then—then there is just one thing to do," Catherine said with determination. "His father can save him, because he owns the courts. If he don't do it because George is his son, then you'll have to bribe him by letting his sheep through here."

"We'll see. But right now I've got work to do, and he has to get to town," Kent said.

"Then I'll take him," the young widow declared positively.

"If you do, Catherine—don't make a fool of yourself. Remember that he won't be in the mood for anything in the sentimental line," her father advised.

George was inclined to protest when he found out that Catherine intended to drive him to town, but she would not be denied.

"You've got to forgive me for what I said the other day," she said humbly. "I didn't realize what kind of a man you are."

"The mistake was perfectly natural," he assured her.

"I want you to be perfectly frank with me," she said. "You have put your life in danger for us, and there is nothing that we won't do to help you—nothing."

"You're wrong," he told her. "My motives were largely selfish. I wanted to lick my dad, and I was thinking about Homer Willis and some of the others as much as I was about you."

"As you were about me! George, could you say that after the rides we've had together, and the kind of friends we've been? Didn't I offer to help you get that ranch you wanted?" Her voice sounded a little hysterical, and George looked at her is amazement.

"Why, of course I appreciate your friendship, Mrs. Bedford, and I wanted to protect your father from Dad, but—"

"Never mind," she said softly, and a wistful smile came over her handsome face. A great light dawned upon George. This woman loved him! He gazed at her trim figure. She was in every way desirable, a woman that any man could be proud of. Something seemed to shake him out of his accustomed poise. He glanced about furtively, and saw that they were alone. Then, with a hoarse cry of "Catherine," he suddenly took her in his arms.

It was a mad, mad moment. Their lips met lingeringly. Catherine was an artist at stirring a man's emotions and she did her utmost. But the wild exhilaration passed as abruptly as it had come. With a curiously dead feeling, George realized that there had been something lacking. The woman's physical attractions had overwhelmed him, yet he was aware that he

had no particular urge to savagely protect and fend her from the world. At the same time her recent low opinion of his motives reoccurred to him, and in sharp contrast came the memory of Laura Grant's fidelity.

The woman was quick to note his change of mood, and she was far too adept to make the mistake of trying to cause another emotional climax at once.

"Come on," she said calmly. "We'll go down there and face the trouble together."

She tried hard to get all the details of his life from him, but he was strangely reticent about the last part of it. He told her freely, and with much self-scorn, of the wasted years of his life, but she could only get the most meager details of his recent actions. His mind hated to dwell upon the recent tragedy more than was necessary, and he was unconsciously preparing to resist her efforts to be a part of his defense.

At his suggestion when they were about ten miles from town they took a longer and little used road, but by doing so they avoided meeting anyone coming from Pebble.

"Why do you need to give yourself up at once?" Catherine demanded as they entered the outskirts of the town.

"I'm not," he said. "I would like you to put me out at Lige Hayes' store. Then I won't ask any further favors from you."

"George, you cannot say that," she protested. "After what has happened between us, I'm not going to desert you. I'm going to stay right here until you are free."

George was keenly aware how futile and feeble were the arguments he could bring to persuade her to go home, and Catherine, he had learned, was not subject to persuasion, anyway. So he remained silent.

The car stopped in front of the store and George got out hastily.

"Who are you going to see here?" Catherine asked.

"My—my—secretary."

Her eyes opened widely. "You didn't tell me about—her."

"She was my father's secretary," George said shortly. "When I bought the Smith ranch I had to have somebody here to look after things."

"Well, I'll see you again before—before I leave," she said.

George ran into the store, and saw Laura behind a counter. Her face brightened at sight of him, and she stepped from behind the counter to shake hands. Her warm greeting assured him that news of the Dirty Devil tragedy had not yet reached town. And as he clasped her cool fingers and looked into her steady brown eyes, he experienced a pang of remorse. Why had he been so premature in making love to Catherine Bedford, he wondered? Win or lose in his present trouble, he felt that he had become a man. And he owed everything to Laura.

"Things are going good," Laura said. "There is a first-class lawyer arrived to take charge of your case, and your uncle has wired you the money you asked for. How do you like your new ranch?"

"I haven't seen it, Laura," he said. "Where is the lawyer?"

"At the courthouse, I think. He has been engaged to defend the ranchers that are accused of murder."

"We've got to get him here," George declared. "Did you ever do any newspaper work?"

"Why, no," she said wonderingly. "Shall I telephone for Mr. Hollingsworth to come here?"

"Please do. And then I wonder if you could do some writing in the back room?"

"Why, yes. Are you still hiding?"

"For a little while," he said. "Will you send the lawyer in when he comes, Mr. Hayes?"

"First shot," Lige promised.

"All right. Bring your pencil and paper, Laura," George said a bit grimly. "We've got to concoct a story for the Chicago papers."

A few minutes later Laura was seated beside a huge dry goods box which did duty as a table.

"First we'll have to have a heading," George said. "MILLIONAIRE'S STUPIDITY DRIVES SON TO MURDER, will do as well as any."

The girl's pencil dropped to the floor

with a clatter. "George! What are you talking about?" she demanded.

"I had to kill a couple of men last night," he replied quietly. "When I'm arrested I want to have the full story written out. Whether it is published or not will depend upon my father. If he gives up this range war, it won't be. If he refuses, I want you to get the story to the papers. I'll give you the facts, and I know I can trust you to write them up properly."

"Go ahead." the girl said.

For ten minutes George talked, and the girl took down his words in shorthand. Her face was deadly pale when he finished, but she had held steadily to her task.

"The points that must be brought out hard are the extremes to which my father has gone in his hoggishness. We'll have to bear down hard on Perry's confession, though he may repudiate it. But they can't get away from the fact that they tried to accuse one crowd of men of murder when they knew it was another one who had moved their sheep. We'll say that Perry confessed that the body of the dead man was brought across the river by Oscar Larsen, and we must play up Larsen's violence, his whipping herders with a quirt and such as that. It will make good reading, and I'm dead sure that Larsen, in one of his fits of passion, killed the herder for not resisting the cattlemen. We'll emphasize the fact that Albert Mullins must have known about it. I'll not deny killing those two gunmen, but I'll declare that I was compelled to do it."

"And I'll swear that those two gunmen tried to murder you in Chicago. It will look to everybody as if your father had those particular men come out here because he wanted you killed," Laura said.

"I don't believe he did," George said.

"Well, we'll let him try to explain that he didn't," the girl said grimly.

"Do you think you can fix it up?" he asked.

"I can fix it up so that Albert Mullins will be ashamed to show his face among decent people again," the girl said hotly.

"Before we complete it, we want to consult the lawyer, and find out just how far we dare go. The main thing we are after is to protect the cattlemen, and beat Dad in this range war," George said.

"Indeed it is not," the girl denied. "The main thing is to get you out of trouble."

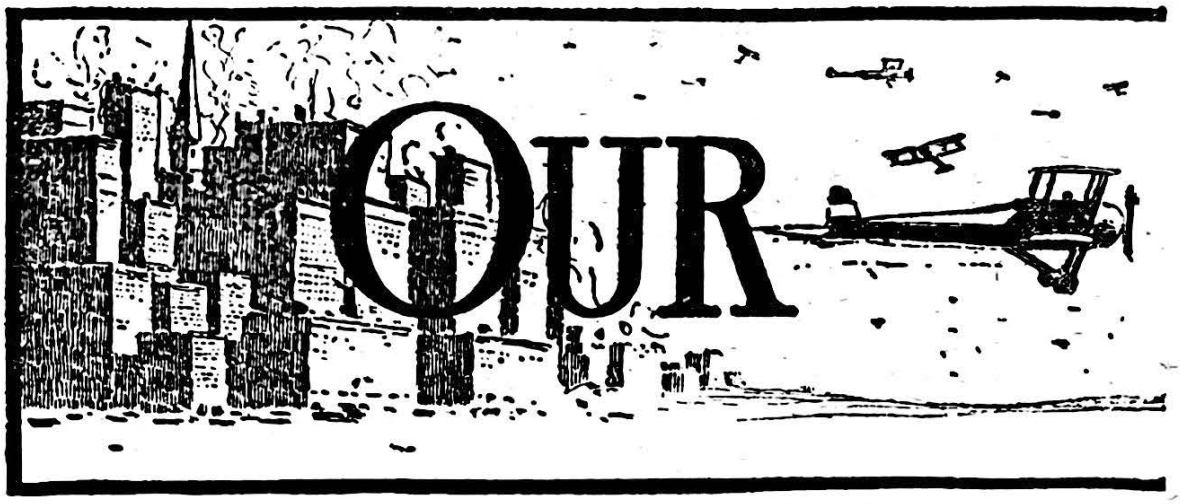
"No," George demurred positively. "The only way for me to get out of it is to completely expose Dad's methods, and even then I'd stand a small chance. I know Dad. If the exposé does go through—if this is ever published—he'll fight to the bitter end. I'm banking on the fact that he'd rather lose this fight than to court publicity of this kind. The Turnbows are fighting him, and if this ever became public they'd break him in the commission business."

Before the girl could answer, the door opened and Lige Hayes and Attorney Hollingsworth entered. The latter was a lanky individual with a fighting face. Both men looked grave.

"Word has just been received at the courthouse that you dynamited a bridge, and murdered three men last night," the lawyer informed, as soon as the introductions were over.

"Their count was wrong," George grinned. "It was only two. Listen to the notes Miss Grant will read, and then I'll be ready to take my medicine."

(To be concluded in the Second September Issue.)



OUR AIR MAIL is running daily between the editorial office of RANCH ROMANCES and its readers throughout the world. The Editor wishes to establish a definite understanding with every reader and be in a position to know just what you want and why. RANCH ROMANCES is not published for any one but the reader, and we want you to look upon this magazine as something distinctly your own. Take a personal interest in its future. Write and tell us exactly the kind of story that you think ought to go into it. Also we want to help make friends for our readers. We want to help you to know friends who are thousands of miles away or within a stone's throw of your own town. OUR AIR MAIL will be glad to forward and exchange letters. The Editor reserves the right to read and turn over to the Postal Authorities, if necessary, anything that is not in keeping with the clean, outdoor spirit of RANCH ROMANCES. Be sure to enclose postage for letters sent by OUR AIR MAIL.

WATCH WICKETT GROW

Dear Editor:

I wonder if there is room in your corner for a new reader? I have read your magazine since the first issue of January 1927.

Have found nothing else equal to "Ranch Romances." It will cheer you up when you are blue.

We live in a new oil town by the name of Wickett, but have no post office and have to go seven miles to post office. It won't be long until Wickett will be a great town. Everybody, come and look Wickett over! When you come you will come back again. Probably buy a business lot and "watch Wickett grow."

I am nineteen years old, blond hair, blue eyes and five feet three.

Will certainly welcome all letters received. I want all of you to write me. Will try to answer.

Hoping you will find room for me,

Sincerely,

Monahans, Tex. — *BLONDIE.*

"R. R." VALUABLE "ASSET" TO CALIFORNIA GIRL

Dear Editor:

My sister was the first to introduce the "R. R." magazine into our home, and with an invalid mother to care for, I find it a valuable asset.

"Our Air Mail" is very interesting, and I always read it. But I just couldn't "sit out" and be a looker-on any longer. I would like to join your ranks also.

If you possibly can, will you please print enough of this letter to enable me to be known by those who read "Our Air Mail"? For I would like to hear from anyone and everyone of both sexes.

I love outdoor sports, especially horseback riding and camping. I like dogs and always wanted to live on a big ranch. I am five feet four and am eighteen. Please excuse so many "I's."

Here's to the future success of "R. R."

Yours truly,

Lankershim, Calif. — *BLONDY.*

HAS ENJOYED MANY HOURS WITH "R. R."

Dear Editor:

Just a few words about "Ranch Romances." I think it is wonderful. Good and clean throughout, and that is something that cannot be said of all magazines on newsstands to-day.

I'm glad I was fortunate enough to find out how good it is, for I have derived many hours of delightful entertainment reading the stories in this magazine.

The "Air Mail" department, too, claims not a little of my interest, and I wonder if you will send the enclosed letter to F. Moore, Brooks Field, Texas. I want to thank you in advance.

Respectfully,

Manistee, Mich. — *LEONA.*

CRAZY, CRAZIER, AND MORE CRAZY ABOUT "R. R."

Dear Editor:

I am hoping that my words won't run awry with me and make this letter too long, because if I have to start over again I'd just make it longer.

I'm crazy, crazier, and more crazy about the stories in "R. R." I'd like it even more if I could get it oftener. I have been reading too much and decided to cut out buying magazines, but you can bet your sweet life I am still reading "R. R." All the stories are perfectly wonderful.

I would so love to have cowgirl and cowboy pen pals. I'm crazy about letter writing and I am so lonesome. I am sure some of you readers will take pity on poor me. I am nineteen, but of course you'd never think it, so I'll say I am sixteen. I want a million letters—and if I don't get 'em I'll—I'll just surprise you.

"SMILING."

New Brunswick, N. J.

P. S.—I'm watching my mail box already.

RED-HEAD PROMISES TO BE A GOOD PEN PAL

Dear Editor:

I have just been reading over some old issues of "Ranch Romances"—having read every issue for over a year. I read a letter in the "Air Mail" from "Jack." He lives in Galveston, Texas. He said that he would like to hear from red-headed girls—well, here's one ready to hear from him. I'm only fourteen years old, but I'll promise to make a real good pen pal.

I certainly enjoy reading your beloved magazine. It's the best ever. I like the stories about Little Windy.

I wish that lots and lots of "R. R." readers would write to me.

I remain,

Rhame, N. Dak. — *"RED-HEAD."*

RUTH SAYS "R. R." AUTHORS KNOW THEIR STUFF

Dear Editor:

I have just finished reading the second June number and I sure did like all the stories, every one of 'em.

The authors of the stories in "R. R." sure know their stuff about the open spaces of the Golden West.

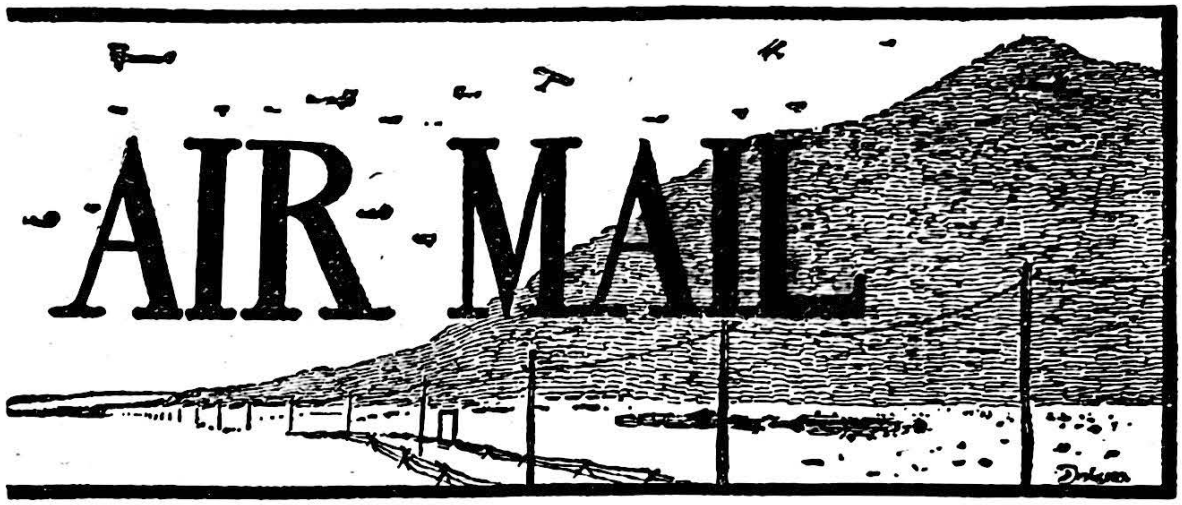
I like "Ranch Romances" better than any other magazine I have ever read.

I would like to have a few pen pals, and if anyone would care to write to me I would answer their letters promptly. I would love to hear from real honest-to-goodness cowboys and cowgirls or from anybody else.

I do hope that my letter will be in "Our Air Mail." But I will have to close before it is too long.

Yours truly,

Venice, Ill. — *RUTH.*



TRAVELS AROUND THE WEST IN "R. R."

Dear Editor:

I don't hear anyone kicking about "R. R." coming twice a month. I'm sure I'm not going to. I only wish it came every week. It is simply the best magazine I've ever read.

I'm not going to vote on any one story, for I liked every one of them. I can't see how any one could pick out the best one, for they are all that.

Seems like we must be in the West the way the sandstorms are coming this spring. There's hardly a day we don't have one, and very little rain.

I've never been out of Texas and Oklahoma, so I just travel around in "R. R." and enjoy it. I sure would love to see some beautiful places in the West. I'm tired of these mesquite bushes and sandstorms.

I am 23, have long brown hair, gray eyes, and a freckled nose. Have been married seven years. I would love to correspond with any of the "R. R." readers that care to write.

Big Spring, Tex. DICKIE.

FIVE FEET ONE AND A HALF SMALL.

Dear Editor:

Will you publish the letter of a lonely girl so that she may gain a few friends through your "Air Mail"?

I am eighteen, have brown wavy hair and blue-gray eyes. I am five feet one and a half inches tall, or maybe you would say SMALL.

I am enclosing a letter to Ray of Ft. Klamath, Ore., and would appreciate it very much if you will forward it for me.

I haven't read very many copies of "Ranch Romances" but like it very much just the same, and every chance I get I am going to read it from now on.

I will be willing to answer any letters I receive, whether from boys or girls.

I close this letter, wishing "R. R." the best of luck and hoping I will receive some letters from its readers soon.

Bend, Oregon. BERTIE.

HAS HERDED DOGIES HERSELF

Dear Editor:

I have been reading "Ranch Romances" for quite a while now, and will say that the stories are simply great, also "Our Air Mail." I was raised on a ranch and have rode herd on a bunch of dogies myself. And I'll tell you I'm sure lonely here in this city. I wonder if some of your readers are as lonesome as I? I'd sure love to hear from some of the cowboys and girls, also others who are lonesome. I will tell them about myself and the country around here. Tell them to rush their letters as my mail box is sure empty these days.

Wishing "Ranch Romances" the best of luck,

Sincerely yours,

Wilmington, Calif. GERTRUDE.

TO "RANCH ROMANCES"

Oh, the romance that lies 'neath Western skies,
And the lure of the prairie trails,
And the best stories of the ages,
Are contained in the pages
Of your wonderful Western tales.

I buy each issue, indeed it is true,
I read and like each story,
For in them I see what appeals to me
Of Western love and glory.

JACK RANDALL.

HERE IS OUR OLD FRIEND JACK RANDALL AGAIN

Dear Editor:

May I be permitted to have another letter inserted in the "Air Mail" department? The last letter of mine was in the December issue for 1925. I was in Hawaii then.

I am still a reader of your sublime periodical, and derive many auspicious moments perusing its contents. You deserve unlimited commendation for the clean, wholesome stories you publish, and for refraining from the usage of the morbid, trashy stories that so many magazines take delight in issuing to the public.

If this letter is published, I would like to have someone write to me. Just anyone from anywhere, I have a very lonesome time here, as I am so far away from home and friends. My native home is "Staked Plains" in Texas.

Wishing you continued success, and with best wishes to every reader, I remain,

A sincere reader.

Bridgeport, Conn. JACK RANDALL.

"ARIZONA ON THE AIR"

Dear Editor:

Will you please make room for a cow (kow) girl from Arizona?

Was born and raised in Texas, age 19, golden hair and brown eyes. Lived for many years at Fort Worth, the cow town, but Arizona for me. We have here the real cowboy, and plenty of them. We have the golden sunshine, the mountains, and deserts, and hills. Wickenburg, my home town, is in the center of the gold and silver mines of Arizona.

Boys and girls, write to me.

Best wishes to "Ranch Romances."

Sincerely,

Wickenburg, Ariz. ANNIE LEA.

HERE YOU ARE, HELEN

Dear Editor:

I'm just another of the "R. R." fans a-raring to let go with a few lines of praise. I'll make a grand burst of it and get it out of my system. Am just a recent reader of "Ranch Romances" and will sure fill up my bookcase with "R. R.'s" and "Ace-High's." The pep and action in the stories sure set my blood rushing at full speed. I just got through reading the first two tales in the June issue, "Beauty and the Yeast," by Wm. Freeman Hough, and "Tobasco, the Trouble Maker," by F. W. Hilton, and say, "Bully for the authors, may we fans always be favored with such thrillers."

Perhaps you'll let me join "Our Air Mail." It sure is a wonderful way of making friends with our pals in the Golden West. I wonder if they would get their pens in hand and drop me a few lines? I'll answer all communications promptly—honest I will.

I see most of the readers give part of their history, so here goes: Am just 18, have dark brown eyes, black lashes, medium brown hair, and 5 ft. 3 inches. Love all kinds of clean sport. Hurry up, cowboys and cowgirls, out in that West—all letters welcome.

By the way, Miss Flynn, should this letter find its way to your desk, I hope you will have room to squeeze it in a corner in that "R. R." magazine. Would appreciate it if you would forward the enclosed letter to "A Fellow from the Golden West." Thank you.

With heartiest wishes for unlimited success to "Ranch Romances," I remain,

Faithfully,

Chicago, Ill. HELEN FROM THE WEST.

ALL LETTERS WILL BE GIVEN A WARM WELCOME BY THE CONVALESCENT

Dear Editor:

I have been reading "Ranch Romances" for quite a while and I just want to say it can't be beat.

I have only been out of the hospital a short time and your "Air Mail" has appealed to me as a source of entertainment. I love to get letters.

I am enclosing a letter to "Sailor Cowboy Jack," from Parris Island, N. C. Will you please forward it? Thanks!

All letters will be given a warm welcome by

Pierce City, Mo. A CONVALESCENT.

MONTANA ADMIRER OF "SCARUM"

Dear Editor:

I just finished reading the first issue of the June "R. R." and had to write and tell you how much I enjoyed it. I have been reading every issue of "R. R." since February and I don't intend to miss one from now on. It's the best little magazine on the market and I've read them all.

I especially like "Scarum" and her adventures in the matrimony business, but every one of the stories are good. I always reserve the best reading until last, the "Air Mail," and enjoy reading about the different "R. R." admirers from all over the world.

I would like to have a few pen pals who read "R. R." I have lived in Montana all my life. It's a wonderful state and I can give information about hunting, fishing and good camping places.

Please forward the enclosed letters, and I hope you will find room among the other "Air Mail" letters for mine.

Wishing you the best of luck and success,

Yours,

Thompson Falls, Mont. CLARA.

"R. R." STORIES SATISFY WESTERNER ON EASTERN SOIL

Dear Editor:

I am a reader of "Ranch Romances," and being a real Westerner on Eastern soil, they sort of satisfy that homesick feeling a person contracts when off native soil.

Up until the last six years I spent most of my life on a Montana ranch, sixty-five miles from the nearest railroad. So I would be especially pleased to hear from anyone in that State. I read and write a great deal, and will gladly answer all the letters I receive.

I am thirty years old and would like to hear from folks near my own age.

Athens, Ohio. OLD-TIMER.

IT'S NEVER TOO LATE TO JOIN US

Dear Editor:

Have been reading "R. R." for some time and I can sure tell anyone that it is the best magazine around here that I ever read.

I would like very much to hear from some of the "R. R." fans. I guess I will have to describe myself first. I am a patient in the Sanatorium and am 16 years old, five feet six inches in height, and weigh 136 pounds. I would appreciate all letters received and answer them right away. Some of the fans please write, as I am very lonesome here and away from home. I think I am rather late in asking to be a member of your "Air Mail," but I don't think you would mind that.

I will sign off, wishing "R. R." readers the best of luck.

Yours truly,

Saskatoon, Sask., Can. GUS.

MINNESOTA GIRL LOVES THE WEST AND WANTS PEN PALS FROM OUT THERE

Dear Editor:

I just started to read "Ranch Romances" a while ago, and think them the best magazine stories of the West. The stories are great! They are romantic, full of thrills and excitement!

I'm a lonesome girl living in the country, and I think country life is great. I do love the Golden West, especially the open spaces, mountains, and outdoor life.

I would like to hear from some pen pals, the real cowboys and cowgirls, those living in Wyoming, New Mexico, Texas, or Montana, who are they? It would be wonderful to hear from them. I wonder if I will see my letter printed (for I won't miss any of these magazines). Still I might not see it at all, if the wastebasket is ready.

Wishing "Ranch Romances" luck, I remain,

Yours truly,

Welcome, Minn. VIOLA.

OUTDOOR SPORTS ARE EVA'S DISH

Dear Editor:

I have just finished reading my first copy of "Ranch Romances." It is needless to say how much I enjoyed it, and especially "Our Air Mail" section. That is enough to give anyone an inspiration, and it certainly did me.

I cannot say which story I liked the best; they were all full of life and go from beginning to end.

I am visiting my brother now, but am going home in two weeks, and I sure would like to have a mail box full of letters waiting for me. I'll guarantee all letters will be answered "pronto."

Outdoor sports are my dish, especially tennis and swimming, and anything else that comes along.

Now for a little description: I am seventeen years old, five feet three, with dark brown hair and eyes.

Now you cow sharks and otherwise, get busy and strut your stuff.

With best wishes and further advancement to "R. R.," I am,

A "Double R." Booster,

Leavenworth, Wash. EVA.

SHE'S JUST SPOILING TO MAKE YOUR ACQUAINTANCE

Dear Editor:

By chance I got hold of one of your "R. R." magazines and I must say that I'd like to repeat everything that any reader has said in regard to praise of your magazine. It's out of sight, just can't be beat!

Now, as to myself—I'm a girl of fifteen years, 5 ft. 2 in., wavy black hair, gray eyes, and weigh 106 pounds. I'm from the country, and I sure feel out of place in the city.

I like reading, music, swimming, and all kinds of athletics, horseback riding especially. I have always wanted to go West and lead that life. Therefore I would be awfully glad to hear from any boy or girl from the West or anywhere for that matter. So don't be bashful, all you cowboys and cowgirls, 'cause I'm just spoiling to make your acquaintance. I would like to exchange snapshots and photographs with you all, too. I'll answer all letters, so hurry and let's see who'll be the first to write to

"THE LITTLE COUNTRY LASS."

New Orleans, La.

SURE YOU CAN JOIN, IRENE

Dear Editor:

Now that I wrote a letter about forming a club, I wonder if I can join the "Air Mail"?

I get awfully lonesome at times and I wonder if some lonesome ranger or cowboy would like to write to me.

I will answer all letters.

I am glad "R. R." is published twice a month, as it is a mighty nice magazine, and I guess from the letters published in the "Air Mail," everybody agrees with me. Here's success to "R. R." always.

Sincerely,

Brooklyn, N. Y. I. L. O.

A JOLLY FLORIDA CRACKER

Dear Editor:

As I don't see many letters from the State of sunshine, I decided I would write. I would also like to join the "Air Mail."

I think "Ranch Romances" is the best magazine I have ever read, and I have read several different kinds.

I am seventeen years young, brown eyes and hair (bobbed), and fair complexion. I would like to hear from boys and girls from different States, especially from out West. Come on, all you good-looking Westerners and write to a jolly Florida Cracker.

Wild Wood, Fla. "BROWN EYES."

BLUE-EYED PEGGY JOINS YOU ALL

Dear Editor:

I was just wondering if I could join your "Air Mail." I am a new reader of "R. R." and I think it is just the thing.

I am a high-school girl sixteen years old, 5 ft. tall. Have dark complexion, blue eyes, and brown hair. I am very fond of all kinds of outdoor sports, hiking, horseback riding, and especially swimming.

I wonder if any of your readers would care to correspond with me. I will answer all letters, either boys' or girls'. Would like to exchange pictures of my part of the country.

Wishing you and "R. R." the best of luck,

I remain,

Davis, Okla. PEGGY.

HER SLOGAN IS: A PAL IN EVERY STATE

Dear Editor:

Thank you very much for the new-found pen pal that I have. I would love to have more. My slogan is this: "A pal in every State," so I am sending a few letters. Will you please forward them?

Oh, I forgot! If anyone would care to write to a girl not lonesome, but itching to have new friends, please do so. I am 16, have long brown hair, brown eyes, am 5 ft. 3½ in. tall. I am a little old-fashioned and I love my flower garden.

Trenton, N. J. A FLOWER GIRL.

WOULD LIKE TO HEAR FROM THOSE GAME ENOUGH TO WRITE

Dear Editor:

For the first time in my life I have read "Ranch Romances" and I think it is just dandy! You can bet I won't miss it again.

Your "Air Mail" I just love, and I'm sure I'd love to hear from anyone that is game enough to write to me. I am 18 years old, have wavy black hair and blue eyes. Do you think anyone would care to write? If they do, I'll be waiting.

Sincerely and doubtfully,

Asbury Park, N. J. KATHARINE.

FROM A CURLY-HEADED BLUE-EYED BLONDE

Dear Editor:

Will you welcome a newcomer to your happy band and accept the congratulations of one who loves your "R. R." stories?

Am a curly-headed, blue-eyed blonde, soon to be 18 years of age. I have been sick lately and all I do is watch every mail for letters from my friends. Will every boy and girl of any size, age, color and description please post a letter to one who will sincerely appreciate it?

I think I could write an interesting letter as I'm in for any and everything. I'm crazy about all outdoor sports, music, and love to read. I play the violin and sing a little. Hope the musician, Ed, of Tampa, Florida, sees this and writes to me; also Jimmie of Florida, and Ethel of California. But please, every one write, as I will look anxiously for letters from every State in the Union—foreign countries, too.

Yours with hopes,

Hymera, Ind. HELEN.

HAS BEEN AN "R. R." ADDICT A LONG TIME

Dear Editor:

Just a word to tell the value of "Ranch Romances." It sure is the best Western magazine ever published. Have enjoyed every story that I read and I've been an addict for a long time.

I hope you can find space in your "Air Mail" department for a lonesome fellow from the city where ball players are made—John "Stuffy" McInnis and Ralph "Cy" Perkins. I would like to hear from pen pals, girls and boys all over the country, and also Canada. Am nineteen, considered good-looking. Will exchange snapshots of the showplaces and also myself.

Wishing you all the luck possible for the success of "Ranch Romances,"

Yours,

Gloucester, Mass. CHUB.

NEW CANADIAN READER WANTS TO CORRESPOND

Dear Editor:

I just received this magazine and I like it very much. I work in an office and read in my spare time.

I am eighteen, curly brown hair and five feet two. I would like very much to correspond with someone (of either sex) about my age.

Sincerely,

St. Catherine, Ontario.

AUDREY.

DOT IS LOOKING FOR SOMEONE TO WRITE TO

Just finished the last May issue of "R. R." and enjoyed it immensely. Also I am pleased it is published twice a month.

I am sixteen years old and am in second year high school, but still I have time to write.

Now, I'm looking for someone to write to me. I would like letters from girls and boys in the West. Come on, everyone, and write.

Massena, N. Y. DOT.

ALWAYS READS "R. R." BEFORE ANY OTHER MAG.

Dear Editor:

I have been a steady reader of your "Ranch Romances" for almost a year, and I like it fine.

I also read other books, but not until I read "Ranch Romances."

Would like to hear from some cowboys, anyone from twenty to twenty-five, and anyone from the West.

Will answer all letters pronto. I am eighteen years old, black hair, brown eyes, and like all clean outdoor sports, but do not dance.

Willing to exchange snapshots.

I have sent a letter which I wish you would forward to "A Fellow of the Glorious West."

Wishing "R. R." much success,

Portland, Me. "A PORTLAND LILLY."

CAROLYN WANTS LETTERS FROM TEXAS AND ARIZONA

Dear Editor:

I have been reading "R. R." since September and I like it better than any other magazine I have ever read.

I would love to hear from some real cowboys from Texas and Arizona.

Have written to "Big Tex" of Texas and J. W. Y. of Sacapoose, Ore., but haven't received any letters yet.

I am twenty-two, with blond hair and blue eyes.

Hoping to see this in "Our Air Mail" and wishing "R. R." the best of luck,

Sincerely,

Southampton, L. I. CAROLYN.

ANOTHER TEXAN JOINS THE CROWD

Dear Editor:

Will you let me get in your "Air Mail"? I am a new reader of "Ranch Romances" and will tell the world they are the best that I've ever read. I am going to read every issue that is printed.

I am five feet eleven inches, black hair, and dark brown eyes. I am nineteen years of age.

I would like to hear from all of the boys and girls from everywhere.

Give us some more stories like "The Pioneer Heart."

You will find enclosed a letter to "Mattie, the Scottish Lass." I am anxious to hear from her.

I will sign off. It's exactly at nine o'clock, Dallas time.

Sincerely,

Dallas, Texas. CARL.

WOULD LIKE A FEW PEN PALS HERSELF

Dear Editor:

I have been reading your magazine for quite a while now and surely enjoy your stories. I also read the letters in the "Air Mail" department and enjoy them very much.

As I would like to have a few pen pals myself, would you please try to find room to put my name and address down. I am sixteen years old and live on the Columbia River. I would also like to exchange snapshots with someone. I think that I could give anyone who was interested some information about the West. Thank you.

Sincerely yours,

Box 76, Skamokawa, Wash. UTA.

IT'S O. K.—PARD.

Air Mail Boss:

I would like very much to get in touch with Miss Ann of Cheyenne, Wyo., whose letter was in your April first issue, but I'm in an awful fix.

Here's my sad story: I have nothing but Chinese stamps, and certainly can't send you a Chinese stamp for postage, and haven't seen any American money for ages, so it's out of the question to send you two cents, to mail the enclosed letter to her, if you will. Therefore I'll have to try to bargain with you. I am enclosing you a brand new Chinese paper twenty cent piece, and if you care for it as a souvenir, it's going to cost you a two cent stamp! Their money rises and falls. Right now a twenty cent piece is worth about eight and one half cents American money, or gold as it is commonly called.

It's very seldom a "Ranch Romances" gets aboard, but I certainly have enjoyed the two I've seen. "Chuck Uses His Head," was a mighty fine short story and for a longer story "The Ghost at Bitter Water" was a pippin!

Hoping you can forward my letter, I am,

Sincerely yours,

Chinkiang, China H. H.

Whom Shall I Marry?

By PROFESSOR MARCUS MARI

SEPTEMBER

VIRGO

VIRGO rules until September twenty-third. These people are fine scholars, musicians and leaders in education of lines. They are original in speech and their minds are quick and well balanced.

Men of this sign should not waste time in subordinate positions, as they are capable executives and work best when independent of others' domination. Freedom is as necessary to them as air. They chafe under restraint, give way to intolerance and impatience, and become thoroughly unhappy and make others equally wretched.

Confidence entrusted to the people of this sign is in safe keeping, for nothing under the sun can induce them to betray a trust.

They are self-conscious and sensitive in the extreme. Though they have a full share of self-esteem. They are, especially in youth, seized with a shyness which, unless checked by reason and the acquirement of poise, becomes almost a panic.

They make fine loyal friends, and in the home are delightful companions, who are very earnest in their desire to contribute to the comfort of their loved ones.

In the signs of Leo, Libra and Pisces the people of Virgo will find congenial mates and friends.

Professor Mari will give a personal reading to any reader who sends in the coupon.

Name .....Sex.....,
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Always use this coupon and enclose stamped envelope. R. R. 9-12-27

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THEN CHOOSE AVIATION!

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Aviation is growing so swiftly that one can hardly keep track of all the astonishing new developments. Air-mail routes have just been extended to form a vast aerial network over the entire U. S. Airlines and airplane factories are springing up all over the country. Men like Henry Ford are investing Millions in the future of commercial Aeronautics in America! The possibilities are so tremendous that they stagger imagination!

Everything is set for the greatest boom in history. The fortunes that came out of the automobile industry and out of motion pictures will be nothing compared to the fortunes that will come out of Aviation! There is just one thing holding it up:—lack of trained men! Even in the beginning thousands will be needed—and generously paid. The opportunities open to them cannot be over-estimated. Those who qualify quickly will find themselves on the road to undreamed of money—success—popularity—and prominence!

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Get into this thrilling profession at once while the field is new and uncrowded. Now—by a unique new plan—you can quickly secure the basic training for one of these wonderful high salaried jobs at home, in spare time. Experts will teach you the secrets—give you all the inside facts that are essential to your success. And the study of Aviation is almost as fascinating as the actual work itself. Every Lesson is chock-full of interest—and so absorbing that you actually forget you are studying. But best of all are the ultimate rewards you are fitting yourself to gain!

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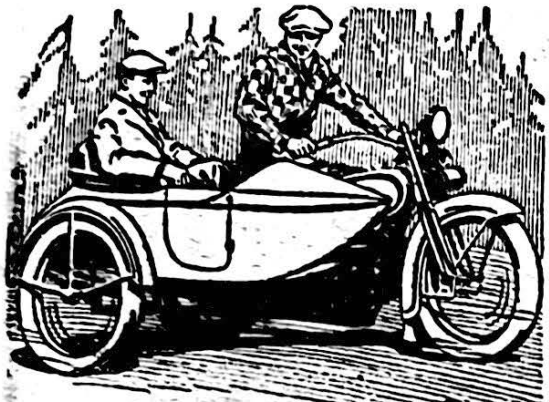

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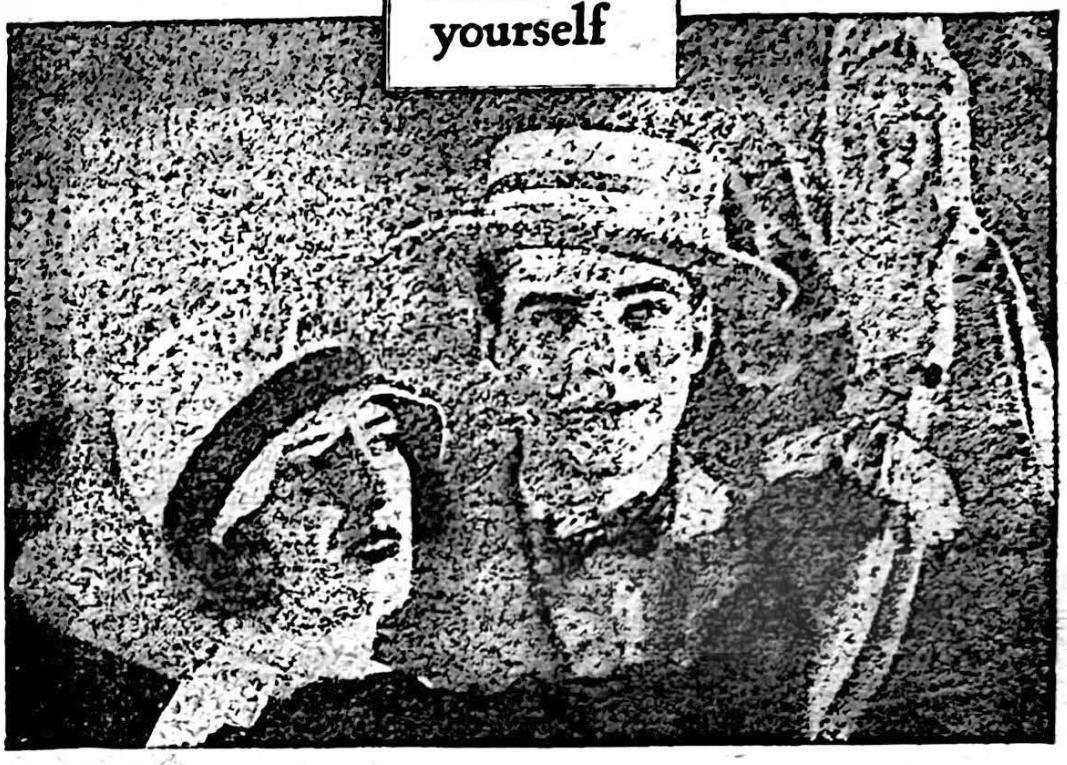

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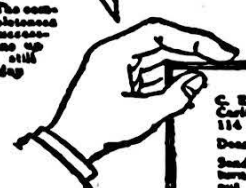

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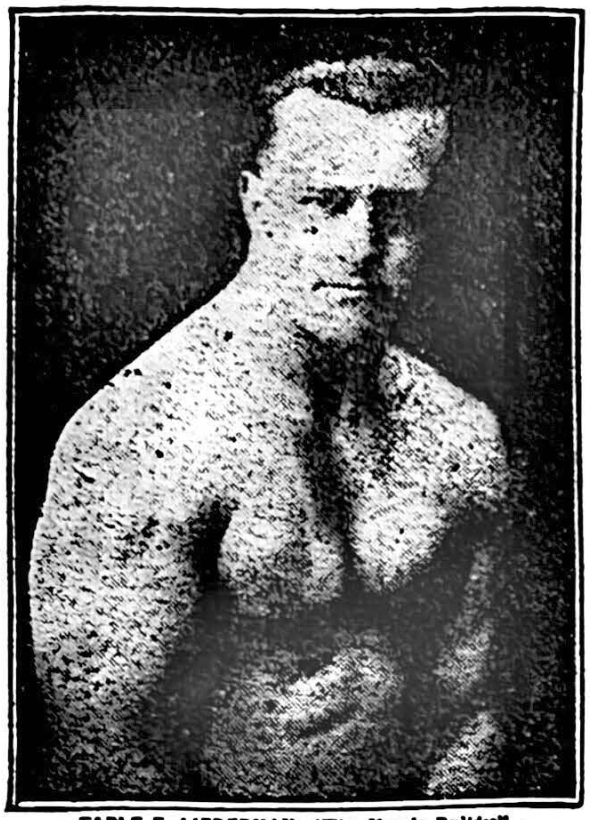

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Director Extension Work

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It might be safe for you to stand still and take it easy—if you could get everyone around you to do the same. **But they won't.** Ambitious men, go-getters are studying their jobs, thinking out new ways to improve "upkeep" and repair service. You haven't a chance against better educated men or those who are improving themselves by READING UP on Auto Maintenance. It will pay you BIG to turn even a part of your spare time into mastering all branches of Auto Engineering.

"Auto Engineering" Library Loaned Free! to ambitious men!

Built especially for men with limited education, by eleven of America's greatest Automotive Engineers. The most COMPLETE and authoritative work on auto "up-keep" ever compiled. Written so you can understand it, and benefit by it. Also used by THOUSANDS of Auto Engineers, Service Station Superintendents, Garage Foremen and skilled mechanics to look up difficult problems in the day's work.

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AUTO OWNERS MYSTIFIED BY NEW DEVICE | Public Welcomes News

NEW INVENTION MAKES THIS POSSIBLE

A mysterious whirlwind device that can be installed in a few minutes on any car makes it possible for cars to run on 7% gas. Already thousands of cars have been equipped and are showing amazing mileage tests on gas. Bona fide reports show up to

60 Miles On a Gallon of Gas

This device not only saves gas but increases power, prevents carbon forming, produces flashy pick-up and quick starting.

$100 a Week Territory Open

The demand for the Whirlwind is spreading like wildfire. Men are needed everywhere to take care of local business. $100 a week is easily possible. Part time workers can earn $5 an hour. Write today for this splendid opportunity and free sample offer.

Free Sample

Is supplied to our workers so they can equip their own cars.

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Sensational Money Maker!

Trousers—made-to-measure by Hutchins of Cincinnati—offer you best opportunity to make big money cleanup. Men buy two and three pair soon as they glimpse rich patterns. Factory prices. Collect big profit in advance.

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Just show line—that's all. You'll write orders fast. Segal made $33.00 in one day. Records show even bigger earnings for scores of men. $10 to $20 a day easy. No experience necessary. We show you how.

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Send no money for big new outfit showing actual samples of latest Spring and Summer styles, finest fabrics. We send it *free* because we know you'll make good. Ask for FREE PANTS offer. No obligation.

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TOBACCO

Or Snuff Habit Cured Or No Pay

Superba Tobacco Remedy destroys all craving for Cigarettes, Cigars, Pipe, Chewing or Snuff. Original and only remedy of its kind. Used by over 500,000 Men and Women. Perfectly harmless. Full treatment sent on trial. Costs $1.50 if it cures. Costs nothing if it fails. Write today for complete treatment.

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See Miles Away! Distant people and objects seem close. Wonder telescope opens 3 1-2 ft. long, 5 sections, brass bound, powerful lenses. C. Palm wrote: "See numbers on cars mile away; see mountains on moon." All pleased.

Free Carrying case Strap and Solar EyePiece to view the Sun.

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On arrival pay Postman $1.85 plus postage. (2 for $3.50) Money back guarantee.

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made to your measure from your choice of finest fabrics in latest style, will you wear it, show it to your friends and let them see my beautiful patterns and classy new styles? Besides giving free suit, I'll pay you $8.00 an hour to introduce my tailoring. Write at once for my startling new special offer.

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THAT LEAD TO BUSINESS CAREERS

DO YOU WANT an important, high-salaried position? You can have one if you can do the work. LaSalle experts will show you how, guide you step by step to success and help solve your personal business problems thru the time-saving LaSalle Problem Method. Our *salary-increasing plan* enables you to prepare during your spare hours, without interference with your present duties. Simply mark on the coupon the field in which you desire success, and we will mail you a valuable book describing the opportunities in that field, together with an outline of our *salary-increasing plan*. Also copy of "Ten Years' Promotion in One." There is no cost or obligation. Find out how the *salary-increasing plan* starts average men and women on the high road to success and financial independence. Check and mail the coupon NOW.

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The World's Largest Business Training Institution

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- ☐ Business Management
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Name .....

Present Position .....

Address .....

I'll Pay YOU $100 a Week

Make $100.00 a week and up, selling our fine made-to-measure, all-wool suits, direct to wearer. Biggest values—positively sell on sight. Biggest commissions paid in advance. We attend to delivery and collections. 6 x 9 cloth samples—over 100 styles—furnished FREE. Ambitious men write at once.

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A Perfect Looking Nose CAN EASILY BE YOURS

Trutex Model No. 25 corrects now all ill-shaped noses quickly, painlessly, permanently and comfortably at home. It is the only noseshaping appliance of precise adjustment and a safe and guaranteed patent device that will actually give you a perfect looking nose. Over 90,000 satisfied users. For years recommended by physicians. 16 years of experience in manufacturing Nose Shapers is at your service. Model 25 Junior for children. Write for testimonials and free booklet, which tells you how to obtain a perfect looking nose.

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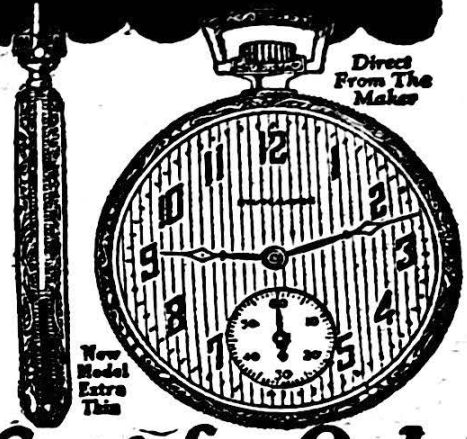
1627 N.H., North 10th Street - - Philadelphia, Pa.

21 JEWEL - Extra Thin

STUDEBAKER

The *Insured* Watch



Sent for Only $1.00 DOWN

A Sensational Offer! Only $1.00 and you get the famous 21-Jewel Studebaker Watch direct from factory! Balance in easy monthly payments!

Lowest prices ever named on similar quality. You save 30% to 60%. Ladies' Bracelet Watches, Men's Strap Watches. Diamonds and Jewelry also sold on easy payments.

This Company is directed by the Studebaker Family of South Bend, known throughout the world for three-quarters of a century of fair dealing. 100,000 satisfied customers. Send coupon at once for full particulars of our amazing offer.

WRITE FOR FREE CATALOG!

A copy of our beautiful, new, six color catalog will be sent Free to anyone sending the coupon below. Shows 60 magnificent, new Art Beauty cases and dials. Latest designs in yellow gold, green gold and white gold effects. Exquisite thin models. Masterpieces of the watchmaker's craft.

Studebaker 21-Jewel Watches have 5 adjustments—heat, cold, isochronism and 5 positions. An insurance policy is given free—insuring the watch for your lifetime!

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To those who write at once for free Catalog we will include particulars of our special offer of an exquisite Watch Chain free. This offer is good for a limited time only. Send the coupon at once—before it expires.

STUDEBAKER WATCH COMPANY
Directed by the Studebaker Family—three-quarters of a century of fair dealing
WATCHES DIAMONDS JEWELRY
Dept. V-701 South Bend, Indiana
Canadian Address: Windsor, Ont.

SPECIAL OFFER COUPON

STUDEBAKER WATCH COMPANY
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- ☐ Please send me, your free Catalog of Advance Watch Styles and particulars of your $1 down offer.
- ☐ Please send me Jewelry Catalog free.

Name .....

Street or R. F. D. .....

City or Post Office .....

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High School Course in Two Years!

You Want to Earn Big Money!

And you will not be satisfied unless you earn steady promotion. But are you prepared for the job ahead of you? Do you measure up to the standard that insures success? For a more responsible position a fairly good education is necessary. To write a sensible business letter, to prepare estimates, to figure cost and to compute interest, you must have a certain amount of preparation. All this you must be able to do before you will earn promotion.

Many business houses hire no men whose general knowledge is not equal to a high school course. Why? Because big business refuses to burden itself with men who are barred from promotion by the lack of elementary education.

Can You Qualify for a Better Position

We have a plan whereby you can. We can give you a complete but simplified high school course in two years, giving you all the essentials that form the foundation of practical business. It will prepare you to hold your own where competition is keen and exacting. Do not doubt your ability, but make up your mind to it and you will soon have the requirements that will bring you success and big money. YOU CAN DO IT.

Let us show you how to get on the road to success. It will not cost you a single working hour. Write today. It costs you nothing but a stamp.

American School

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Send me full information on the subject checked and how you will help me win success.

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....Building Contractor	....Lawyer
....Automobile Engineer	....Machine Shop Practice
....Automobile Repairman	....Mechanical Engineer
....Civil Engineer	....Shop Superintendent
....Structural Engineer	....Employment Manager
....Business Manager	....Steam Engineer
....Cert. Public Accountant	....Foremanship
....Accountant and Auditor	....Sanitary Engineer
....Bookkeeper	....Surveyor (& Mapping)
....Draftsman and Designer	....Telephone Engineer
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$2 an hour!

for CARLTON Agents!

Bigger profits than ever, because our Fall line offers greater values, smarter styles prettier materials than ever before! Stunning models from $4.95 to $15.95. Easy to make $2 an hour, part or full time, because women simply can't resist our fascinating styles and low prices.

No Charge Outfit That Paris Look!

You don't need selling experience or knowledge of dress business to sell Carlton dresses. Just show the stunning fashion plates and material samples. Outfit and supplies absolutely FREE. Write today, stating territory wanted. We'll show you how.

87 Paris models of cloth and silk at a big saving because sold direct. Practically no competition left. Carlton representatives are WELCOME by every woman in every home, because our values and styles are KNOWN.

CARLTON, INC., 206 S. Wabash Ave. Dept. 275-A, Chicago

Part-Time Men get This Suit FREE

Make $45 a Week and up

Cash profits paid in advance

No question about it, any man can easily earn $45 a week and up, just showing our wonderful outfit and taking orders for our high-grade tailoring. Never before such low prices and beautiful styles.

Your Own Clothes FREE

To introduce our unbeatable values, classy styles and perfect tailoring, we make this introductory free suit offer—something different, better, bigger, more liberal than any offer ever made.

Handsome Carrying Case Outfit

of large real cloth samples—everything furnished FREE. *Write today for free suit and big money-making offer.*

SPENCER MEAD CO., Wholesale Tailors, Dept. J-894, Chicago

MATCH YOUR COAT and VEST with NEW TROUSERS, FREE SAMPLE

DON'T DISCARD YOUR OLD SUIT. Wear the coat and vest another year by getting new trousers to match. Tailored to your measure. With 90,000 patterns to select from we can match almost any pattern. Send vest or sample of cloth today, and we will submit FREE best match obtainable.

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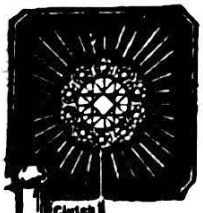
AGENTS 500% PROFIT

GENUINE GOLD LEAF LETTERS

$ guaranteed to never tarnish. Anyone can put them on stores and office windows. Enormous demand, large profits. Paul Clark says: Smallest day $22.70. R. L. Reel made $920 in two months. Write today for free sample and liberal offer to general agents.

METALLIC LETTER CO., 418 N. Clark St., Chicago



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No References. No Delay. Nothing to Sign. Just say "Send that Pin."

Blazing, blue-white, full karat, cluster scarf pin. Genuine Solid 14 Karat white gold, mounted with nine dazzling diamond reproductions. Looks like $500.00. Gorgeous gift. Velvet gift box and anti-theft clutch free. Send no Money. Pay postman only $2.75 and postage and delivery and 50c weekly after that ($10.75 in all).

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HEALTHY GOV'T JOBS $140-$300 MONTHLY OUTSIDE or INSIDE WORK

Men-Women, age 18-50, wanting Forest Ranger, Railway Mail Clerk, Border Patrol Guard, Mail Carrier, Special Agent, Matron, and other Gov't Positions, local or traveling. For particulars write Mr. Ozment, 112, St. Louis, Mo.

NEW & IMPROVED MODEL BOILER

EXTRA STRONG COPPER

Most Practical Boiler and Cooker

Made with large 8-inch Improved Cap and Spout. Safe, practical and simple. Nothing to get out of order, most substantial and durable on the market. Will last a life time, gives real service and satisfaction.

Catalog Free

Easily Cleaned

Cap removed in a second; no burning of hands. An ideal low pressure boiler and pasteurizer for home and farm.

Save 20%

By ordering direct from factory. No article of such high quality and utility ever sold at such amazingly low prices. Prices quoted are cash with order or one-fourth cash, balance C.O.D. Send check or money order; prompt shipment made in plain strong box. The only boiler worth having. Large Catalog Free. HOME MANUFACTURING CO. Dept. 2960 18E. Kinzie St. Chicago, Illinois

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Just five minutes of your time on each Ford means $1.75 profit on a $2.50 sale

To a man with vision—an "up and at 'em" fellow—one who will say—"I'll make your car ride 100% smoother, without spring rattles or spring squeaks, or give you a set of RIDE AIR Cushions Free!"—that chap can easily earn $8.75 in less than an hour! And I'll prove it to you absolutely if you'll write to me NOW! Sample Free.

C. F. HAMILTON, Sales Manager, Desk NG-9
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You can now Own a Typewriter!

$2.00 down and its yours
Guaranteed 5 years
Small Monthly Payments
Free Course in Typing
Send Now for Big free Book

Shipman-Ward Mfg. Co., 1866 Shipman Bldg., Chicago *World's Largest Rebuilders*

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Skin Troubles

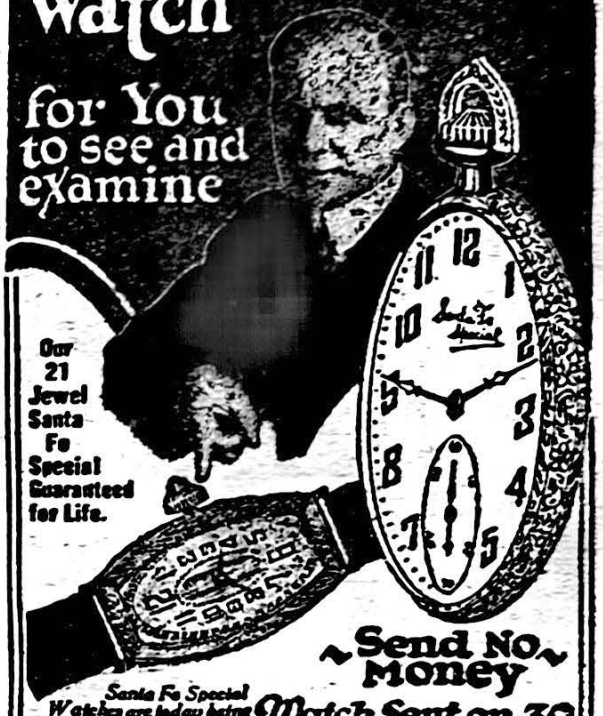
Cleared up—often in 24 hours. To prove you can be rid of Pimples, Blackheads, Acne Eruptions on the face or body, Barbers' Itch, Eczema, Enlarged Pores, Oily or Shiny Skin, simply send me your name and address today—no cost—no obligation. CLEAR-TONE tried and tested in over 100,000 cases—used like toilet water—is simply magical in prompt results. You can repay the favor by telling your friends; if not, the loss is mine. WRITE TODAY.

E. S. GIVENS, 412 Chemical Bldg., Kansas City, Mo.

Wonderful, new device, guides your hand; corrects your writing in a few days. Big improvement in three hours. No failures. Complete outline FREE. Write C. J. Ozment, Dept. 87, St. Louis, Mo.

I Want to Send You a Santa Fe Special Watch

for You to see and examine



~Send No~ Money

Watch Sent on 30 Day Free Trial

Santa Fe Special Watches are today being shipped to every civilized country in the world, and are probably the best and most favorably known watches in both Army and Navy.

In addition to our NEW LOW PRICE, I will send for your approval one of these Standard Watches, guaranteed for a lifetime of satisfactory service, not only by the Santa Fe Watch Company, but by the Great Illinois Watch Factory. So accurate, Government officials carry them; so perfect and beautiful, jewelers say they are worth 1-3 to 1-2 more than we ask for them. I will send you one to see WITHOUT ONE PENNY DOWN—allow you to wear it 30 days FREE—then sell it to you on easy payments.

WHY NOT OWN A 21 JEWEL SANTA FE SPECIAL WATCH?

You will never miss the few cents a day that will make you own one of these watches—SEND FOR WATCH BOOK—illustrating in beautiful colors hundreds of designs and combinations in cases in the POCKET WATCH, MEN'S STRAP WATCH and LADIES' WRIST WATCH. You can have your name or monogram and any emblem you may desire engraved in the Case to suit your own ideas. Write today for Free Watch Book, and make your selection at once, while this offer lasts.

FREE A limited offer! With every Santa Fe Special a beautiful gold chain or strand of exquisite pearls.

Write today. Mail coupon for both Watch and Diamond Catalog

SANTA FE WATCH COMPANY
955 Thomas Building Topeka, Kans.
(Home of the Great Santa Fe Railway.)

Mail coupon today!

SANTA FE WATCH COMPANY
955 Thomas Building, Topeka, Kansas

Please send prepaid and without obligation your Watch Book Free, explaining your "No Money Down" Offer on the Santa Fe Special Watch.

Name.....

Address.....

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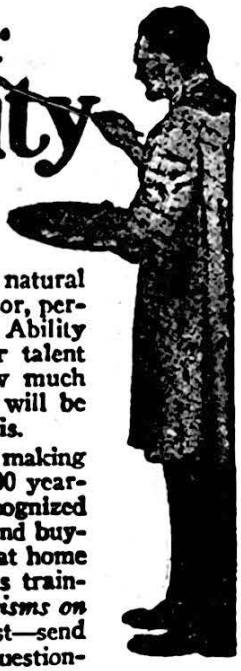
Test Your Art Ability FREE



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Many Federal Students are making $3,500, $4,000, $5,000 and $6,000 yearly. The Federal course is recognized everywhere by art employers and buyers of commercial art. Learn at home in spare time, without previous training. *Personal, individual criticisms on your work.* Get this free test—send the coupon now for your Questionnaire. Please state age and occupation.

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Age..... *Occupation*.....
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No Joke to be Bald

Grow New Hair Quick

Let Me PROVE It To You FREE

What I accomplished on my own head, pictured above, I believe I can do for you, provided you are under 45 years of age and loss of hair was not caused by burns or scars. Anyhow, *I must succeed or you pay nothing.* No apparatus—my home treatment is simple, quick and inexpensive.

Send No Money Just your name and address and I will mail you full information with PHOTOGRAPHS, NAMES and addresses of men and women who have successfully used my treatment for dandruff, falling hair and particularly for baldness. Write Now. A postal will do.

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BLANK CARTRIDGE PISTOL

This well made and effective Pistol is modelled on the pattern of the latest type of Revolver, the appearance of which alone is enough to scare a burglar, whilst, when fired, it will probably prove just as effective as a revolver with real bullets, without the danger to life. It takes the standard .22 Calibre Blank Cartridges, that are obtainable most everywhere. Special cash with order offer: 1 superior quality Blank Cartridge Pistol, 100 Blank Cartridges, and our new 550 page DeLuxe Catalog of latest novelties; all for ONLY $1.50. Shipped by Express only. Cannot go by parcel post. Extra Blank Cartridges 50c per 100. Remember, it is quite harmless, as it will not accommodate loaded cartridges. Special Holster (Cowboy Type) for pistol 50c. No C. O. D. shipments.

Special Offer
1 Blank Cartridge Pistol
100 Blank Cartridges
1 550-page Novelty Catalog
ONLY $1.50
The Lot Shipped by Express Only Cash with Order Only

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Stop Using a Truss

Reduced Fac-Simile Gold Medal

Reduced Fac-Simile Grand Prix

STUART'S PLAPAO-PADS are different from the truss, being mechano-chemico applicators made self-adhesive purposely to hold the distended muscles securely in place. No straps, buckles or spring attached—cannot slip, so cannot chafe or press against the pubic bone. Thousands have successfully treated themselves at home without hindrance from work—most obstinate cases conquered. Soft as velvet—easy to apply—inexpensive. Awarded Gold Medal and Grand Prix. Process of recovery is natural, so afterwards no further use for trusses. We prove it by sending Trial of Plapao absolutely FREE. Write name on Coupon and send TODAY.

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Name .....
Address .....
Return mail will bring Free Trial Plapao

Can You Sell Gas At 5c Per Gal.?

If so write me quick. My Distributors make as high as $3,000.00 per month with amazing new thermostatic carburetor device. Let me show you how.

SEND FOR FREE TRIAL

Proof of astounding success and my $15.00 a day Guarantee to Distributors.

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154 E. Erie St. Dept. 771-M, Chicago, Ill.

Be a Winner!

My famous "Luck Power Vs. Mind Power" is free to any one who will wear this replica of the oldest Talismanic ring known. Ancient worshipers of Fortuna, Goddess of Fortune, wore her emblem always. Rare charm. Dazzling beauty. Genuine 10-K Gold F. with blazing, blue-white Diamond Representation, guaranteed 25 years. Wear it and follow the

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Send size at once and 20 cents for postage. Pay only $2.75 when delivered. Money Back Guaranteed.

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TRAVEL - for 'UNCLE SAM'

RAILWAY POSTAL CLERKS
MAIL CARRIERS—POSTOFFICE CLERKS
$1700 to $2700 a Year for Life

No "lay-offs" because of strikes, poor business, etc.—sure pay—rapid advancement. City and country residents stand same chance. Common sense education sufficient—no political influence.

STEADY WORK

Cut coupon and mail it before turning the page.

MEN—BOYS 18 to 45

USE COUPON BEFORE YOU LOSE IT

COUPON

FRANKLIN INSTITUTE, Dept. M-278, Rochester, N. Y. Rush to me, entirely free of charge, (1) A full description of the position checked below; (2) 32-page book, "How to Get a Government Job"; (3) List of positions now obtainable.

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Name.....
Address.....

$40.00 Suit for Only $23.50

Think of being able to offer a $40.00 suit made of the finest quality of pure Virgin Wool; fit, fabric and fashion guaranteed, at the powerfully attractive price of $23.50! Can you sell such values? You can, if the experience of 2,500 other salesmen means anything. And you don't have to know anything about selling clothing. We'll take you, train and equip you to go out and make a success of this work if you are honest, ambitious and willing to work. If you are, write us. You'll hear from us promptly with the full facts. Address Dept. 507.

William C. Bartlett, Inc., 850 Adams St., Chicago

Gentlemen: I'm interested in the opportunity you offer. Please send the facts without obligation to me.
507

Name .....

Address .....

Town..... State.....

Yours for 10 DAYS FREE

$3 DOWN

Say the word and we'll send you a genuine L. C. Smith (world's only ball bearing typewriter) to test 10 days. All the latest operating attachments; beautifully rebuilt; GUARANTEED 5 YEARS. Sensationally priced; 40% saving; easy terms.

SEND NO MONEY

FREE Typewriting Course, Tools, Waterproof Cover if you act now. Write for Special Offer and free typewriter manual.

SMITH TYPEWRITER SALES CORP.
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DON'T BE Unlucky!

ALL around you there is health, wealth and happiness, joy in love, in games, in business. Get your share. Let the confined force of the magic symbol Luckodemus bring happiness to you. Wear this beautiful oxidized silver charm-coin on chain, ribbon, fob, or in pocket or purse. Send no money—pay postman only 97c when he delivers sealed packet of famous coin with good luck and wishing value included free.

97c

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EARN UP TO $250 per month SALARY

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Many men are needed in this permanent, pleasant and profitable profession, where you are practically your own boss, see new faces and places each minute and are rapidly advanced. Travel or remain near at home. We secure position for you paying $120 and up per month—upon completion of 3 mos. spare time home study, or refund your tuition. Write today for free booklet giving full details.

STANDARD BUSINESS TRAINING INST.
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BECOME AN EXPERT

ACCOUNTANT

Executive Accountants and C. P. A.'s earn $3,000 to $10,000 a year. Thousands of firms need them. Only 9,000 Certified Public Accountants in the United States. We train you thoroly at home in spare time for C.P.A. examinations or executive accounting positions. Previous experience unnecessary. Training under the personal supervision of William B. Castenholz, A. M., C. P. A., and a large staff of C. P. A.'s, including members of the American Institute of Accountants. Write for free book, "Accountancy, the Profession that Pays."

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Follow this Man

Secret Service Operator 38 is on the job

FOLLOW him through all the excitement of his chase of the counterfeit gang. See how a crafty operator works. Telltale finger prints on the lamp stand in the murdered girl's room! The detective's cigarette case is handled by the unsuspecting gangster, and a great mystery is solved. Better than fiction. It's true, every word of it. No obligation. Just send the coupon and get—

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